

Feminist Views of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in The Thing Around Your Neck

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Abstract:

As an author and a woman, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie has explored a diverse range of perspectives on feminism to differing degrees and in contexts that are varied in situations and circumstances, and thereby, promoting and defending feminist thought. Through her stories, she articulates the self-proclaimed entitlement by men over women through cultural norms, societal attitudes and chauvinistic behaviours. She has deftly depicted that the essence of feminism lies in countering exploitation, domination, discrimination, marginalization, subjugation and gaining the power of independence in thought and practice. The portrayal of feminism in her novel is distinct and reverberates through her characters who seek and strive for freedom, rights, and an acceptance as empowered women. Furthermore, Adichie creates an emotional and mental convolution of choice where the female characters have to rise above their conditioning and muster courage to stand for what they truly believe in and act towards achieving them, which are hallmarks of feminist opinions.

Keywords: (feminism, empowerment, movement, patriarchy, struggle, independence).

Introduction

Proud of being a feminist, Nigerian-American author Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie first gained fame with her very first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), for which she won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Her multiple award winning novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), which was based on the Biafran War, was adapted into a movie besides being on the GCSE syllabus. Chimamanda lived in Nigeria until she was nineteen before moving to America and her time in her country of origin helped her to witness the plight of the Nigerian women from close quarters. In her book *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), which is a collection of short stories, she narrates tales of Nigerian women in varied settings and timelines, who find themselves in quandaries that are not of their own making, but because of the power wielded by men over them through centuries of social and cultural bondage - the shackles of which are difficult to throw off. She has used the literary platform very effectively to express feminism through her stories and characters, and has delved deep into the struggles and conflicts of women that have scarred their souls. Her dedication to the feminist cause can be witnessed in her TEDx Euston talk *We Should All Be Feminists* (2012), which was published as a book length essay in 2014.

Women's Struggles and Feminist Perspectives

The need to give voice to the exploitation of women in literature can be traced to a motley of explanations and the struggle against them by the female characters, i.e., the fight for their rights and fairness is considered to be a feminist perspective. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Chimamanda Adichie has with great dexterity weaved stories by creating women protagonists in multifarious situations and who are diverse in social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. Though the protagonists are Nigerian, their predicaments are ubiquitous and can be related by women throughout. The addressal to

the subject of feminism stems from “patriarchal attitudes, cultural misogyny and the ingrained belittlement of women.” (Plain & Sellers, 2007). Moreover, awareness regarding the inequality of the sexes has yet to have a firm footing in society and the tradition of rendering women powerless, and thereby making them helpless, is still the norm and Adichie has highlighted them candidly. Apart from bringing to light the ways through which women are oppressed, she has also included women of strong beliefs and mental strength who take a stand, come what may. The presence of feminism is an acknowledgment to the existence of bias and prejudice against womenfolk. In this scenario, it is fair to say that it’s the case of art imitating life than life imitating art.

Furthermore, though the events in some stories take place in America - the land of the free - the mentality of Nigerian men is still rooted and moulded in the misogynistic, chauvinistic and sexist attitudes that dehumanize women. Chimamanda has portrayed the demeanour of men that takes for granted for women to be compliant, acquiescent and amenable. The authors approach to feminism can be described as liberal, radical, socialist and cultural but without infringing the rights of men. It can be aptly described in the words of Harriet Taylor Mill, “[T]he principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.” (Pankhurst, 2012). Additionally, the female leads of the short stories are neither dull or lacking grit, but victims of circumstances that are enforced upon them by society. Some characters defy the odds, some can’t or don’t. Espousing feminism in the stories through her headstrong characters, Adichie is sending out a clear message – if women refuse to genuflect to the conditioning that they have received about

male superiority and their own inferiority, their exploitation and oppression has to come to an end.

Moreover, the author has made telling observations on the prejudiced lives of females in Nigeria, right from their childhood through situations that are outright commonplace. That reveals the extent and gravity of discrimination between the genders. She underlines the fact that exploitation starts very early, at home and outside, and the family which constitutes of both men and women, are responsible for it. That observation also begs the question whether feminism also means a struggle of women who have subjugated to the will of man against women who haven't. The answer has to be a resounding yes as a few female characters of the book are met with resistance from their own ilk. That can be corroborated by arguing that "anti-feminism may emerge as a rich source precisely because 'antis' sought to portray women's demands as a slippery slope." (Delap, 2005). The "slippery slope" implies to forgo or risk losing any minor rights or freedom that they have for a cause that denotes struggle and uncertainty. Adichie's talent lies in offering views from both sides of the spectrum, and by doing so, brings to light the genuine reasons that causes exploitation of women. *The Thing Around Your Neck* has an undeniable taste of feminism from an author who exhorts everyone to be feminists.

Adichie's Feminist Standpoints on Married Couples

Adiche has very meticulously crafted the subject of power among married couples that is usurped by men as their birthright and the struggles that women have to wage to be on the same footing. In *Imitation* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*, the protagonists, Nkem and Chinaza, respectively, are victims of poverty in Nigeria and move to America by marrying men for a better life and financial security, but realize later that they been cheated upon, fooled and tricked. Nkem had slept with men, married and single, before

she got married to Obiora, but those men only took advantage of her poverty and never proposed marriage while some expressed their reluctance by putting forth a lame excuse that she was a Bush Girl. As for Chinaza, the world around her comes crashing down once she gets to know that Ofodile is a liar and a promiscuous man who was married before, and not divorced, while he was married to her. In both the stories, the men neither show any regret or remorse upon their reality being uncovered. That revolting attitude of men originates from their belief system that women should be subservient, passive and slavish because they provide for them. And such beliefs are not ingrained in one's consciousness in a day, they are a result of the acceptance of women's oppression through the traditional patriarchal society where women are marginalized, excluded and ostracized from having any say or questioning the conduct of a man.

Therefore, Adichie's opinions on feminism or her take on the ill-treatment meted out on women is not limited to equal rights, it encapsulates the origins of anti-feminism which have become a part of culture in a majority of societies. In both the short stories, the presence of shared power does not exist in the relationship dynamics because both – Obiora and Ofodile – are certain that they have left their wives helpless and powerless, and have taken advantage of women who are victims of circumstances, chiefly, poverty. Here, the author clearly signals the significance of financial feminism to avoid overdependence on their husbands or anyone for that matter. Any form of feminism is inextricably connected to empowerment. If women have to be made financially independent, they should have the right to education and freedom to choose their trade. To achieve that aim, a conflict with the established sets of rules that are formulated by men, need to be abolished. Feminism is an ongoing movement that cannot rest on its past laurels because each era brings new hurdles and struggles that need to be overcome. Besides, Nkem and Chinaza could not walk out of their marriages because Nkem had to

think of the future of her kids and Chinaza had nobody to go back to in Nigeria. Both ladies had learnt of the unfaithfulness of their husbands but couldn't do much for financial reasons. According to a report titled '4 Ways to Address the Gender Finance Gap and Empower Women' by the World Economic Forum on gender inequality, "Gender differences in financial inclusion have far-reaching effects on women's quality of life and autonomy, their families and their communities, putting them at risk of financial fragility and poverty, especially in times of crisis." (Mallinckrodt, 2021).

Ironically, Ofodile, like his mother, expected Chinaza to be a virgin. The belief that a woman's virginity is the ultimate test of her character is a degrading, demeaning and a vile form of oppression. Adichie has, in a very forthright way, revealed the dark side of the thought process while selecting a bride. Furthermore, Ofodile reveals to Chinaza that he married her because she was light-skinned and would have light-skinned black children who would fare better in America. Also, Nkem, upon telling Amaechi that Obiora has a mistress back in Nigeria, receives a reply that he should be forgiven because that's the trait of men. Such irrational ideas reduces a woman to a commodity and a subject of objectification while men are not held culpable at all. On analysing the aforementioned happenings, it is evident that the cause of feminism is also about fighting dogmatism that is entrenched in the psyche of a majority of the people, both men and women, who consider sticking to the age-old imbalanced gender dynamics as a socio-cultural norm. To add insult to injury, women are habituated or advised to disregard the infidelity of their husbands by women. Ofodile wants to Americanize Chinaza, and by doing so is not accepting who she is, while Obiora defines his responsibilities towards his wife as providing a life of luxury sans fidelity. Such mindset of men is a result caused by the internalisation of misogyny. Additionally, women having equal rights is considered to be a severe threat to their entitlement of domination and abuse.

Family Gender Bias

Chimamanda Adichie, in her work, has called attention to the origins of unfairness and favouritism against the girl child which later takes the ghastly form of exploitation. Firstly as a woman and secondly as an author, she narrates incidents of bias in the lives of her characters which seem inconsequential at first, but the repetition of which gives birth to resentment and hatred. The author has made an effort to trace the cause and effect of female exploitation that starts early. Through her short stories *Cell One* and *Tomorrow is Too Far*, she elaborates that the cause of feminism has to start early by turning the spotlight on the different yardstick of raising a girl and a boy. Nnamabia is a teenager who has been a troublemaker since he was a child, but always shielded and unpunished by his parents. The overindulgence by his parents emboldens him which finally results in getting him arrested on the accusations of being a member of the cult. Throughout the story, Adichie narrates incidents of Nnamabia's transgressions which were swept under the carpet for he was their son. Interestingly, his father is a professor, a highly educated man, but his attitude towards his son's misdemeanours is that of laxity and tacit approval. Contrarily, they reprimand their daughter for speaking her mind.

The author has brought to the fore the disparity of parents towards their children on the basis of gender. At the same time, she leaves it to the discretion of the reader to make insightful reasoning of the situation through the lenses of gender discrimination. Feminism, as an ideology is not limited to struggles or making laws to protect women, it also exhorts society to be understanding and co-operative to women's perspectives and feelings without being told to do so. Rather than being a forced ideology, feminism should be a voluntary effort by individuals on different levels, but the idea that the implementation of feminism should be applied to parenting as well is itself appalling. The

reasons for bias can be attributed to “parents view male and female children as having different roles and obligations towards them, in keeping with existing cultural norms and this in turn reinforces their preference for the male child.” (Sabir, Ebrahim, 1980). In *Tomorrow is Too Far*, Adiche presents a classic example of unabashed favouritism to a male child by his Grandmama, who is a son’s son. The story is tragic and compels the reader to contemplate on who is to be blamed for Nonso’s death – the girl narrator (Nonso’s sister), Grandmama or the culture that lays emphasis on the continuation of ancestral lineage through a male member?

Adichie has plotted a story where complex negative emotions come into play in the heart of the narrator, the youngest among the first cousins, and barely in her teens when she deliberately pranked Nonso to his death. Her mother’s and Grandmama’s total and unconditional love for Nonso causes her great resentment of which she is not a recipient. The addressal to the feelings that take root due to unfair and biased treatment and result in hatred is very well encapsulated in the story. The emergence such feelings don’t arise suddenly, they are a result of continuous experience of discrimination. Grandmama loved Nonso more than his younger sister and cousin Dozie because she was just following the patriarchal tradition of her society. However, for the narrator, that created a feeling of being unwanted, unloved and made her wrongly believe that Nonso was the cause for Grandmama’s behaviour towards her. As a child she too sought attention and the feeling of being valued, a natural expectation from a child that was denied. When a child witnesses and experiences such bias, “the nonpreferred child creates narcissistic vulnerability, due to a sense of unworthiness, of being unloved, and of feelings of envy, which in turn affect sibling relationships (Angel & Brody, 1998).

Tomorrow is Too Far, depicts the cultural norm of raising children of different genders i.e, where even grandparents are party to the bias inflicted upon a girl child. The

idea of patrilineality, that the lineage of a family is continued only through a male offspring and hence the lament of Grandmama upon seeing his dead body. The hatred, malice and viciousness of the narrator towards her own brother can be analysed through varied angles and perspectives. What Grandmama did, and what the narrator did, are acts of the causes and effects of gender discrimination. Neither Grandmama was aware that she was being biased because that's how Nigerian women are conditioned – to prefer the male child, and nor the narrator as to the behaviour of Grandmama and also that of her mother. Misogyny, a form of sexism, is rampant and thriving because it is accredited by society and it's practice can turn innocent girls like the narrator into vengeful beings who are too young to gain an understanding of the treatment meted out to them.

Oppression, Exploitation and Courage

Feminism was born to give equality to women vis a vis man. Apart from serving fairness, it's objective is to ensure the prevention of ill-treatment of women and guarantee justice. However, the implementation of feminist values and laws that are framed to define the ambit of feminism cannot work without the support of a law enforcement agency. For example, a sexual assault or the cheating of woman by taking advantage of her helplessness don't always go reported. At times, no cognizance is taken. Therefore, any resistance by a woman for her right and protection can be defined as feminism. Chimamanda Adichie explores those situations through credible stories that are relatable. *The Thing Around Your Neck*, *Jumping Monkey Hill* and *The Headstrong Historian* are stories that define the courage of women against all odds. Through the protagonists of those stories, Adichie sends out a message – courage is feminism. Be it Nwamgba, Akumna or be it Ujunwa's own story through her character Chioma, the presence of fine traits and a fighting spirit in all of them are for reasons that they find

worth fighting for. That in itself is the essence of feminism. Significantly, to be a feminist, one does not need to be educated or need any support from people. It just needs a will to stand up for what's right. Nwamgba proves it.

Chimamanda has included women from all classes and backgrounds to drive home the point that no matter who or what a woman is, she needs to struggle and fight a battle, the result of which is uncertain and the price that needs to be paid is too high, but all is worth it, for the pride of woman is priceless. Nwamgba's positive attitude towards life, her fearlessness, belief in justice and immense family love is an epitome of feminism. Her personal trials, travails and tribulations do not deter her from what she believes in. Her pining to seek justice for her husband's suspicious death which she blames on his cousin brothers and the usurping of her land by them leads her to educate her son in English so that the courts will judge in her favour. A battle which she ultimately wins. Her only son Anikenwa's fierce opposition to the clan's way of life is countered by Nwamgba and his asking of her to convert to Christianity is met with a firm denial. Though she does object to his decision to be a Christian. Adiche has included almost every major aspect of life of an illiterate woman who is wise in her knowledge of life. Most importantly, Nwamgba acts and ventures into unknown territory to fight what is right. The author rolls back time in this story to say that the trampling of the rights of women and their oppression has no barriers of time, place and family relationships. It is through such women that modern feminism was born.

Fast-forwarding to the modern era, Adiche narrates a tale about an up and coming writer Ujunwa, a Nigerian, who participates in the African Writers Workshop in South Africa. The major messages of the story related to feminism are found in the story that she writes, her own real experience at the workplace, in which she replaces her name with Chioma. The subject of sexual exploitation is presented through the situation of a

workplace and that of male infidelity in marriage, through her fathers unfaithfulness to her mother. The use of women as sexual tools for business growth is a precedent that has been set by big business establishments. That can be corroborated with “ *Quid pro quo* harassment, which translates to “this for that,” is the notion that someone’s employment, promotions, compensation, or other terms and conditions of employment are dependent upon submitting to sexual requests or by providing sexual favors.”(Siuta & Bergman, 2019). Chioma finds a job with a bank that entails her to being new accounts. But when she witnesses her colleague providing sexual favours to a prospective client who wants Chioma to be her personal contact, in other words, to please him sexually. Chioma quits the job with her honour intact just like before when as she walked out of an office after she was sexually assaulted the moment after getting hired as she is unwilling to degrade and dishonour herself.

Furthermore, her father abandoning his wife and daughter for another woman can be inextricably be linked to her own experiences because ultimately, it’s all about male domination that gets emboldened after finding a woman in a sorry state and the urge to take advantage of her sexually takes root. The situation of Akumna in *The Thing Around Your Neck* is similar except that the sexual perpetrator is her uncle who promises to do many things for her if she provided him sexual favours. Moreover, the disapproving looks she got for being with her white boyfriend, made her aware of racism and also that living the American dream was not that she had been told about. Her father’s death was just an excuse for her to leave America and go back to Nigeria, her real home. Adiche has brought to light the misplaced fascination for America and the adjustment and compromises that a person of colour has to make in America. Exploitation and oppression have many faces and most of the time, it’s the women who have to face it’s brunt. The author has elaborated that feminism is a need for women in a world that is run by men.

Conclusion

In a collection of stories, Chimamanda Adichie, in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, highlights the plight of women and their struggles against it through their resilience and gumption. Those struggles are the roots of feminism. By bringing to the fore the exploitation and oppression of women, she also shares her feminist views. Feminism cannot exist without great disparity between the rights of man and woman. Gender equality is the sole aim of feminism and it's roles are varied. Though the stories have African women as the protagonists, their situations are universal. The discrimination against females that begins at childhood continues unabated until their death. Adichie has intertwined the base mental attitude of men towards women and their counter in feminism. Additionally, the author makes the reader reflect on the state of women that is the doing of men. Through her characters, she sends out an undeniable message – that the inner strength of women can overcome any hardships. Any kind of bias, at the hands of any individual, be it a family member, a friend or a colleague, needs to be met with resistance. Feminist views can only gain momentum through awareness against female abuse and men also have to be active participants and proponents of the movement. Having feminist views should not be mistaken for gender bias against men. It means to understand the prejudice against women and working at all levels to eradicate it.

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