

## Re-Visioning Gender Equality and Women Empowerment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Non-Fictional Works

By

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### Abstract

In the Nigerian postcolonial era, one of the globally recognized writers is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This paper deals with the much debated issue of gender equality and women empowerment in postcolonial African or more specifically Nigerian Igbo society as found in Adichie's two famous sensational non-fictional works - *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele, Or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017). The first book is actually a Ted Talk of Adichie delivered in 2012. The second book is originally an e-mail reply to her friend, Ijeawele, regarding how she can raise her daughter feminist. Postcolonial societies retain complex economic, political, social, racial and cultural hierarchies, all of which play a significant role in fueling a recurrent crisis of feminine identity. This paper shows how the girls are being treated in Nigerian Igbo society and the utmost need for women empowerment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century postcolonial Nigerian society.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, women empowerment, feminism, postcolonial identity and ethnicity.

### Introduction

Gender equality and women empowerment have become one of the most important issues in any existing society and literature as well. Gender and sex have historically been used to divide society since the dawn of human civilization, as evidenced by historical records. Every civilization has different roles for men and women. The physical prowess of men and women has long been used to define these roles. Recognizing the apparent differences between males and females are an important step in any relationship. For the first time, there is a clear distinction between boys and girls based on biological and anatomical variations. Another characteristic that distinguishes a boy from a girl is their gender. In order to put it more simply, gender is a social construct that is based on the roles that boys and girls are expected to play in society and culture. Boys and girls have different socially acceptable behaviours dictated by their families, communities, and educational institutions. The socially defined roles we take on as we mature into men and women become an integral part of who we are.

Since the dawn of our civilization, it has been common practice to divide children into boys and girls. Men are given cars and balls, while girls are given dolls to play with, in order to better understand the situation. Both toys are suitable for children of all sexes. There is a lot

of debate about why boys get toys like vehicles, while girls get dolls. As a result of this perception of our society, it may be inferred that even toys can differentiate between boys and girls. If we pay attention to the tiniest details, we can discover these subtle differences. Many of the books and movies we have read or seen reinforce this gender stereotyping, which depicts girls as weak and dependent and boys as tough and active.

Many academics, such as Don Zimmerman and Candace West, have found and described that there is a significant gap between the ways in which men and women express themselves verbally. There is widespread scepticism among academics concerning the gender-based systems for a variety. According to researchers such as Judith Fetterley, members of the feminine gender learn not only the vocabulary of their own culture but also the language of the dominant masculine culture. Again, academics like Don Kraemer propagate the idea that people of the feminine gender primarily use masculine language, which is why they are unable to express what it is that they want to. In this respect, Dennis Baron's finding is very noteworthy:

Women are reminded by men that their language is a nonstandard dialect, possibly of alien origin, and they are encouraged to develop a passion for correctness that involves both the rejection of what is supposed to be their natural feminine dialect and the adoption of a supposedly masculine Standard English that would represent for women an alien tongue. The problem is compounded because it is based not on actual language production but on stereotype: it is difficult to find with much certainty either spoken or written dialect features—whether of pronunciation, voice quality, choice of word or idiom, syntax, or anything else that can be safely labeled male or female ... (Grammar 88)

Therefore, throughout the ages, the feminine voice has always encountered and reverberated with danger coming from the world dominated by men. To reiterate, women and girls are typically regarded as inactive participants, while men and boys are expected to take charge of every aspect of the situation. As a direct consequence of this, as we mature gradually, we gradually begin to reject the women folk and their speaking style. In many cultures, the roles of men as breadwinners and women as caregivers have traditionally been reversed. Because of their capacity to provide financial and nutritional support for their families, men have traditionally been accorded a higher social status than women throughout history. Women are relegated to the background, and the work they do is looked down upon as unimportant and unimportant. Therefore, gender-based distinctions and discrimination have been around since the beginning of time; and when we read Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's well-known non-fictional works - *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, Or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. The first book is a Ted Talk delivered in 2012. The second book is an e-mail reply to her friend, Ijeawele, regarding how she can raise her daughter feminist. Because postcolonial societies inherit complex economic, political, social, racial, and cultural hierarchies, postcolonial societies almost always experience a conflict of feminine identity at some point. This paper shows how the girls are being treated in Nigerian Igbo society and the utmost need for women empowerment in the 21st century postcolonial Nigerian society.

The theoretical framework of this research is based on Critical Discourse Analysis and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic. Within the realm of linguistics, the term "discourse" most commonly refers to a body of language that is regarded as having a distinct and coherent meaning (Lazar 146). Discourse has a crucial role to play. As a result, discourse deals with knowledge through the use of language and expression. To put it another way, in Critical Discourse Analysis, social practice is comprehended as the production of written and spoken discourse based on a situational context. There are two types of discourse in the worlds

of spoken and written language. They are the cultural context and the situational context (Sunderland 6). Social standing, inequality, and dominance can be found in these two contexts when using the term “gender.” Dijk states that “Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and opposed by talk and written text in the social and political context” (352). This study backs him up. Using Critical Discourse Analysis as a dissident method of investigation allows researchers to express their disapproval of social injustices.

Language function is at the heart of Systemic Functional Linguistics, a linguistic theory. SFL takes into account the linguistic and grammatical structures, but it prioritises the function of language over more structural approaches that focus on the lexical items and how they are combined. SFL is the foundation of Critical Discourse Analysis because it examines how grammar is used in a variety of texts, both written and spoken (Arindo 12). SFL is a requirement for CDA because it helps students understand the underlying meaning of the language they hear. A person’s meaning can be divided into three categories: ideational, interpersonal and textual. For a language to have an ideational meaning, it must reflect human perceptions of their surrounding environment. A communication skill serves as an intermediary between interpersonal meaning, such as expressing and understanding attitudes and judgments, and textual meaning (Mayr 17). In a nutshell, CDA and SFL can investigate Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* for its system of linguistic choice. SFL is the primary method for conducting critical discourse analysis research. As a result, the researcher is able to uncover social issues such as gender and feminism by employing CDA and SFL.

## Discussion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of Nigeria’s best-known postcolonial writers. An adaptation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx Talk, “We Should All Be Feminists,” was released in 2014. TEDxEuston, an annual conference in the United Kingdom featuring leading figures and thinkers on African issues, hosts the original presentation of this talk. Adichie asserts that the term “feminist” is not demeaning. Fidelity is the responsibility of everyone, she claims. An anecdotal story about her childhood friend, Okoloma, begins her story. Adichie was labelled a feminist by him. When she first heard the word, she did not know what it meant, but she realizes this is not a compliment at the time. Okoloma had something negative to say about her. She will never forget what happened that day. Adichie’s first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* is about a Nigerian hero who beats and tortures his wife so ruthlessly that she poisons him to escape. A few Nigerian men suggest her not to use the term “feminist” when her novel is published because feminists are all unhappy and despise men, according to them. But Adichie’s feminism is not shaken by this incident. Instead, she chooses to embrace it. Adichie calls herself a feminist to defy stereotypes.

Adichie illustrates this point by relating her childhood experiences, which took place in Nigeria. She vividly recalls the occasion when she performed exceptionally well on a quiz given in class, an accomplishment for which she was promoted to the role of class leader. Except for the fact that on that particular occasion, the task was awarded to the student who had achieved the second highest mark; this student was a male. When Adichie asks the teacher why, the teacher responds that the title is always going to be rewarded to a boy. The teacher assumes that the students already know this because it is common knowledge. In *We Should All Be Feminists* Adichie says:

I have never forgotten that incident, If we do it again and again, it becomes normal. If we see something over and over again, it becomes normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations. (9)

Adichie endures a similar shattering experience many years later in Lagos when she passes a tip to a man for assisting to park her car. The man, who is once again a man, thanked her friend. Because he believes that Adichie must have received all of her wealth from men. When Adichie's male friend fails to see the sexism in the servant's thanking him for the tip she paid for, she realises that what she considers to be obvious to her may not be to others.

Nigerian culture is reflected in this example of gender and money being treated differently. Male breadwinners are held to a higher standard than female breadwinners because of this. Neither of these incidents can be viewed independently of the other. They are both facets of the same underlying issue. The feminism of Adichie transcends the second and third waves of feminism and speaks to our generation specifically. This fresh approach to feminism is revolutionary. Not because it acknowledges and disproves gender inequality in a more effective manner, but rather because it pinpoints the underlying cause of the issue itself. Adichie demonstrates that gender roles and prejudice can be traced back to the formation of society and the collective experiences of its members. "Culture does not make people; People make culture" (17). The ability to alter societal beliefs and rules rests with each individual, and until that power is recognised, there will be no shift in cultural norms. Adichie demonstrates that feminism is relevant in a way that goes further than how it has been historically defined. The concept of feminism is not limited to only affecting women. She does so with conviction and intent, providing a concrete interpretation of the general concept of why we should all be feminists. The discussion of gender is not an easy one. People report that it gives them an uneasy feeling.

Neither men nor women are willing to openly address the issue of gender or propose solutions to address it. Attempting to change the situation is always a difficult task. Adichie claims that the concept of feminism intimidates men. This is a result of the insecurities that are instilled in boys as a result of the way they are raised. The fact that she offends a society made up of men and women, as well as young boys, does not mean that she is attacking them as individuals. Boys' humanity is stifled by us. "Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys in this cage" (12). Pay difference and the gender - based nature of economic clout are major themes in Adichie's book. Wage disparity between the sexes in Nigeria is so severe that women have been taught not to speak up for themselves for fear of being labelled "hostile."

To sum it up, Adichie argues that promoting rigid gender roles does men and women a disservice. We must acknowledge the existence of sexism and fight to correct it. For centuries, people have been saying the same thing, but Adichie is delivering it in a way that few others have been able to. However, if everything was so obvious, she would not have had to give a TEDx talk. Adichie highly recommends *We Should All Be Feminists* to anyone interested in gender equality. Adichie's writing does not aim to chastise men or pit one gender against another; rather, it is a language of peace. She believes that if equality is to be achieved, society must change.

Dear Ijeawele, *Or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* is the second work studied in this research. This book began as an e-mail to a childhood friend, Ijeawele, about raising a feminist daughter. Adichie writes a letter to her friend and posts it on Facebook in

2016. In 2017, this letter becomes a book. So, the book is epistolary. Adichie explores and emphasizes feminism and gender inequality. Being fully aware of her Igbo ethnicity and Nigerian identity Adichie advises Ijeawele. She comments on how Nigerian and Igbo girls are treated. Adichie offers Ijeawele 15 suggestions.

Initially, Adichie assumes Dear Ijeawele is “too huge a task,” but she later anticipates that the letter “would [serve] as a map of sorts for my own feminist thinking,” emphasizing that she does not have “a set-in-stone rule” (Dear Ijeawele 3-7). As she says, “I matter. I matter equally” (7), her premise is as resolute, vigorous, and vulnerable as ever. The chapbook includes a disclaimer: “I have some suggestions for how to raise Chizalum. But remember that you might do all the things I suggest, and she will still turn out to be different from what you hoped, because sometimes life just does its thing” (7). But remember, you can do everything I suggest and she will still be different than you hoped because life happens (7). “I have some suggestions for how to raise Chizalum. But remember that you might do all the things I suggest, and she will still turn out to be different from what you hoped, because sometimes life just does its thing” (7).

Adichie’s feministic ideas from her TED talk are revisited throughout the manifesto. Although not new, it has a fresh perspective and newfound urgency, which may be its success. Adichie argues that women have an obligation to attempt to be feminists despite the risk of failure on their part, both for themselves and for their children. One must acknowledge and accept feminism in its widest form, she warns, “beware the danger of what I call Feminism Lite. It is the idea of conditional female equality” (10). Adichie further comments, “Being a feminist is like being pregnant. You either are or you are not” (10). The chapbook is replete with witty one-liners. “Cooking does not come preinstalled in a vagina” (9) is one such example. Adichie’s wry humour and perceptive wisdom are balanced throughout the book, and the petite book is gobbled like a peppery pill which can be prescribed to a misogynist with no further diagnosis; and the book’s message is clear and concise.

Each “suggestion” can be summarized in one sentence. Adichie sometimes makes a big splash at the beginning of a new chapter, and other times she subtly inserts it between stories, “Teach her that the idea of “gender roles” is absolute nonsense” (9); “Teach Chizalum to read” (11); “Teach her to question language” (12); “Never speak of marriage as an achievement” (13); “Teach her to reject likeability” (14); “Teach her to question our culture’s selective use of biology as “reasons” for social norms” (17); and so on. Adichie’s desire for the book to be “honest and practical” is realized by the repeated and prescriptive verb “teach,” which is elaborated with her sincere examples of day-to-day experiences. This verb assures the reader of a tried-and-true method while also enabling for mistake and learning. She discusses gender-defined roles and sexual politics both inside and outside of the home through topics like selecting toys (a helicopter over a doll, if she so chooses), cooking, careers, and clothes. She claims “We have a world full of women who are unable to exhale fully because they have for so long been conditioned to fold themselves into shapes to make themselves likeable” (14). Adichie gives women room to spread their legs and find their rights and liberties in her terse and quick prose.

## **Conclusion**

After researching Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists*, the study’s conclusion can finally be used to draw a general conclusion. To fully address the questions in the introduction, the findings of the analysis carried out in this chapter are presented in detail. The data are

accurate, and the solution is obvious. Critical Discourse Analysis serves as its foundation. The dominant gender in Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* is examined in the critique. Adichie's use of language has demonstrated the disparity between men and women.

The analysis of the verb systems reveals the conclusion. Most readers believe that one of Adichie's responsibilities in society is to advocate for women. This action has a significant impact on the language she uses in both her essay and speech. Adichie writes of the material process, "And I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world" (*We Should* 12). This indicates that Nigerian women are constantly curious about men's dreams. They hope to realise their dream of having everyone understand their spoken language. "We must raise our daughters differently" (12). As a single mother who is responsible for raising the children alone, motherhood comes first. This is interpreted as what it means to be a woman in society.

It is clear from the analysis that she primarily emphasizes her femininity in her character. Gender representation therefore pertains to the female gender. In other words, "We must also raise our sons differently and we do a great disservice to boys" (12) because the material process is the pattern. The meaning of those two sentences is that women always extend the proper hand to men or boys. Finally, it is possible that this research will be helpful for future studies, particularly those involving in critical discourse analysis that examines gender issues. Eventually, it can also benefit research on women. The good effect of women in our society will be discovered through research and activism; it is granted to each and every woman and global campaign. Living in Indonesia allows us to learn and develop our critical thinking skills about the role that men and women should play in society there.

Miller quotes Gloria Steinem, a pioneering feminist, in 2017's *The New York Times*, "I am glad we have begun to raise our daughters more like our sons, but it will never work until we raise our sons more like our daughters." This is so that men's and women's roles can both advance. It is not just about women, though. Because we are not raising boys to succeed in the new, pink economy, men are falling behind in both school and the workplace. Cooperation, empathy, and diligence—often thought of as feminine qualities—are increasingly valued in today's workplaces and educational institutions, and the jobs that call for them are those that are expanding the quickest. To create a society of men who respect women and treat them equally, we must change the way we raise boys. The hundreds of heartbreaking accounts of sexual harassment and assault have demonstrated that boys and men should share responsibility for ending this toxic culture as well as girls and women. Rape culture must be destroyed in order to be eradicated; it cannot simply be stopped by calling attention to the predators. With mothers working and fathers splitting household duties, gender equality is easier to demonstrate to children in our society. Due to their contributions to parenting, fathers are now more important role models. This change in the burden of household responsibilities from the women to the men in the family contributes to how our boys view women in society.

One of the most well-known feminist authors and theorists, Bell Hooks, articulates the ethics of love, which she thinks are essential to the theory and practice of feminism. *Feminism is for Everyone*, one of Hooks' seminal texts being published at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, makes this claim. Bell Hooks cuts to the chase in *The Will to Change*, instructing men of all ages, backgrounds, and orientations on how to verbalize the feelings that make up the core of their identities. However, Hooks aims to assist men break out of the harmful norm of toxic masculinity, which punishes their most basic emotions despite the cultural pressures that make it difficult for them to do so. We even go so far as to say that feminism is for everyone who believes in the ability of love—expressed both as an emotion and as activism—to liberate

societies from the hegemonic patriarchal conceptual frameworks, institutional frameworks, and laws that have proven harmful to both men and women.

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