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**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE: A REFORMIST-FEMINIST**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a stern, resilient, and unapologetic reformist-feminist. With her feminist approach, she is poised to break down gender-based discriminatory barriers. Her life experiences, the context and inspiration of her writing, her works, and her resistance as a reformist-feminist will be explored in this biography.

Adichie is a young writer, whom the foremost African Storyteller, Chinua Achebe, has described as having come “almost fully made.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The embodiment of a stern and defiant 21st-century feminist writer, she specializes in nonfictional writing and storytelling that span societal issues from race, identity and love to reformist-feminism. Reformist-feminism criticizes the individualistic and systematic, traditional and modern, conventions that discriminate against women.[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3) Reformist-feminists “present alternatives that improve women's situations, holding true that improvement within given structures is possible.”[[4]](#footnote-4) A reformist-feminist employs the use of positive male characters to challenge those with discriminatory tendencies towards women. Reformist-feminism foresees a happy ending for the societal subjugation of women.[[5]](#footnote-5) Adichie perfectly aligns with this school of thought. The spectrum of her writing is inspired by Nigerian society and history, including trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism, the Biafran war, military coups and counter-coups that rocked the Nigerian state from the 60s to the late 90s, and Nigerian political instability— tragedies that still have wide-reaching and enduring consequences on today’s society. Her works have garnered multiple international awards, recognition, and accolades.

Born on 15 September 1977, in Enugu, Nigeria, Adichie is the fifth of six children of Igbo parents, Grace Ifeoma and James Nwoye Adichie,[[6]](#footnote-6) both of whom were college professors at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka*.* Although her family’s ancestral home, Abba is in Anambra State, Adichie grew up in Nsukka, in the house formerly occupied by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Adichie started her educational career at the university’s secondary school. Later, she went on to study medicine and pharmacy at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for three semesters.[[8]](#footnote-8) During her time there, she was the editor of *The Compass*, a local magazine run by the university's catholic medical students.[[9]](#footnote-9) She transferred to Drexel University, Philadelphia, at the age of nineteen in pursuit of a communications and political science degree. From there, she then moved to Eastern Connecticut State University to finish her bachelor’s degree.[[10]](#footnote-10) Adichie moved with the aim of being close to her sister, Ijeoma, who ran a medical practice close to the university.[[11]](#footnote-11) Adichie wrote articles for the university journal, the *Campus Lantern*.[[12]](#footnote-12) By 2003, she had completed her master’s degree from Johns Hopkins University with a concentration in creative writing.[[13]](#footnote-13) She continued her studies at Yale University where she received an MA in African Studies in 2008.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Adichie grew up to be fully aware of gender politics from her early childhood. In the Igbo culture, the male gender is dominant and preferred.[[15]](#footnote-15) Igbo cultural values specially recognize the male child as compared to his female counterpart. “In communities where such gender distinction is the norm, male children are perceived as the sustainers of lineage, holders of central, and often, most important positions of authority, and inheritors of immovable properties.”[[16]](#footnote-16) A tight patriarchal power structure means that men dominate every sphere of Igbo society. While in elementary school, Adichie’s fifth-grade teacher had promised that the most academically accomplished student in her class would be awarded the position of class monitor, a highly prestigious post usually reserved for a brilliant and academically sound boy. However, Adichie’s teacher withdrew this promise upon the knowledge that her top favorite boys were no match for Adichie’s academic excellence. Despite her unrivaled academic grades, she was denied the post of class monitor.[[17]](#footnote-17) This became the trigger for young Adichie’s feminism. Feminism being relatively new at this time, it suffered considerable setbacks from religious, traditional, and cultural practices. Adichie became conscious of the unpopular phenomenon known as feminism and from a very young age, became poised to break down the barriers that hinder gender equality.

As part of gender inequality, gender stereotypes were part of the society Adichie was raised in. She did not quite fit the perfect “girly” image and type, hence, considerable societal pressure was put upon her. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, she details her experiences when she and her younger brother, Nnamabia, accompanied their mother to the market. Young Adichie looked nothing like her mother. Her mother, as described in Adichie’s words, had a “honey-fair complexion, large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Nnamabia, on the other hand, looked just like their mother, hence, making him incredibly handsome. While at the marketplace, Adichie recounts that the traders would call out to her mother, “Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?” Gender stereotypes continued to follow her into her days of graduate studies. While teaching a writing class in a graduate school, she was always self-conscious and worried about what to wear, so as to be taken seriously.[[19]](#footnote-19) She worried that if she appeared too feminine she would not be taken seriously. To avoid this, Adichie would wear a very serious, manly and ugly suit.[[20]](#footnote-20) The appearance of men is the standard for societal professional norms. The more feminine a woman appears, the less likely she is to be taken seriously as a professional. This was another watershed experience in her life that encouraged her to stop being apologetic for her femininity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s writing is influenced by various factors. The society in which she finds herself in is constantly an influence on her stories. Adichie was raised in Enugu, the proclaimed capital of Biafra, a secessionist state that attempted to break away from Nigeria. This resulted in the Nigerian Civil War, sometimes known as the Biafran War, that lasted from 1967-1970. *Half of a Yellow Sun* details the events that took place in the early 1960s, during and after the war. Adichie employs an anachronistic methodology, alternating between timelines to narrate the effect of the war which directly affected her family as her grandfathers who went to fight in the Biafran regiment did not survive.[[21]](#footnote-21) Adichie also draws inspiration from Achebe. Like Adichie, Chinua Achebe, the author of the widely read *Things Fall Apart*, was brought up in Nsukka and had written a memoir, *There was a Country,* about the Nigerian Civil War. Here, he detailed the events prior to, and during the Nigerian Civil War. Adichie acknowledges his influence, explaining that Achebe’s “work gave her permission to write her own stories.”[[22]](#footnote-22) The relationship between both authors can be examined through the interpretation of African literature, especially as it concerns events of socio-economic and political devotion to re-enforcing societal resistance. Perhaps, one notable way Adichie differs from Achebe is her reformist-feminist agenda. Achebe was not particularly vocal about the notion of feminism. Adichie, on the other hand, exploits this notion with her own unique interpretation.

Clearly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been versatile in her approach to writing. Her works speak volumes as they have been translated into thirty different languages and have appeared in various publications. She has earned much recognition through her creative writing. Her first novel *Purple Hibiscus*, which gives an insight into the “emotional turmoil of adolescence, the powerful bonds of family, and the bright promise of freedom, earned her the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* was published in 2006 and has also been adapted into a movie. The novel details the experiences and events of the Nigerian civil war of 1967, where the short-lived nation of Biafra tried to secede from the Nigerian federation. This book was written from an impenitent Biafran view-point. *Half of a Yellow Sun* won Adichie the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction [[24]](#footnote-24) and was a National Book Critics Circle Award Finalist, a New York Times Notable Book, and a People and Black Issues Book Review Best Book of the Year.[[25]](#footnote-25) Her most current work is titled *Americanah*, “a tender story of race and identity, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the Heartland Prize for Fiction, among numerous other literary prizes.”[[26]](#footnote-26) *Americanah* was also a *New Tork Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Entertainment Weekly* Best Book of the Year.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Adichie’s resistance to the patriarchy and passion for feminism cannot be overemphasized. Her work, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* was written as a response to a letter she had received from a childhood friend who had asked her how she could raise her baby girl as a feminist. Adichie encourages her friend to raise her daughter as an independent woman. She also advocates for the little girl to be given a helicopter rather than a Barbie doll as a toy; for the mother to have an open conversation about boys and sexuality with her young daughter; to discourage her daughter from the mentality that a woman’s place is in the kitchen, making meals for the husbands, while the husband is allowed to pursue a career. This work gives a whole new perspective on gender roles in the 21st century. Adichie uses her work to inspire women around the world in breaking gender constructions, stereotypes, and sexualities that have been made to subjugate women in society. Adichie has described feminism as part of the consensus knowledge on human rights. However, she emphasizes the vagueness of human rights eclipses the specific problems of gender inequality. For her, feminism entails women’s rights, a parallel level of rights, dignity, and respect accorded to women which men already enjoy.

Adichie’s TEDx talk titled, “We should all be feminists,” started a worldwide conversation about feminism. The talk[[28]](#footnote-28) detailed her experiences as an African feminist. She recalled a male friend calling her a “feminist,” clearly with an ulterior motive of insulting her. Adichie argued that being a feminist requires one’s acceptance of the fact the sexism exists in every sphere of society. Here, Adichie unapologetically argues that gendered-based discrimination is still very evident in today’s society, hence, the need for feminism to tackle the problem of gender discrimination. In Adichie’s words:

*We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man. Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don’t teach boys the same? We raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are.”*[[29]](#footnote-29)

Furthermore, Adichie submits that “Gender, as it functions today, is a grave injustice—we should all be angry, anger has a long history of bringing about positive change, but in addition to being angry, I’m also hopeful because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to make and remake themselves for the better.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Adichie also airs her views on how gender bias harms boys and men without them realizing it. She submits that the concept of masculinity is like a small cage into which boys have been forced. This, she argues, stifles their humanity.[[31]](#footnote-31) This exerts the pressure of masculinity, having to prove themselves as strong, tough, invulnerable and unbending. Making boys feel they have to be hard leaves them with fragile egos, she continues.[[32]](#footnote-32) It creates some sense of insecurity triggered by how they are brought up and their self-worth is tarnished if they are not “naturally” in charge as men.[[33]](#footnote-33) This, in itself, can be detrimental to their mental health, and to society at large in the long run. Adichie concludes her talk by emphasizing that a great deal of disservice is done to both men and women if they persist in adhering to the stringent gender roles society produces. Hence, the need to tackle the problem of sexism in a quest to fix the gender problem.[[34]](#footnote-34). Adichie has passed into popular culture with her 2012 TEDx talk, “We Should All Be Feminists,” and the words of her famous feminist speech which have been immortalized in a Beyoncé song, *Flawless.* Excerpts have even appeared on T-shirts at Dior’s Paris Fashion Week show.[[35]](#footnote-35) The use of her excerpts in popular culture has brought her a great deal of attention. Adichie has however been quick to distinguish her type of feminism from Beyoncé’s.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s style is simple but sophisticated. She has been an inspiration to thousands of women around the world who are the constant victims of the hegemonic masculinity that is embedded in the patriarchal society of today. Women are now emboldened to speak up and resist hegemonic masculine norms, and Adichie is a driving force for this movement. Her reformist-feminist approach has been tested and proven effective in changing the minds of men who exhibit discriminatory tendencies against women. With Adichie in the picture, it is safe to say the future is bright for breaking down gender based discrimination.

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