

## Feminist Literary Activism In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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### Abstract

In this paper, I explore the feminist literary activism represented by the creative and critical works of the award-winning Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She has written the novel *Americanah* in the year 2013 which features female protagonists through whom she provides powerful critiques of the androcentric social, cultural, and political structures of the societies she focuses on. These are the major ways in which Adichie has made substantial contributions to feminist activism both on a global scale and in postcolonial societies. Using a narrative and socio-literary framework, I examine the feminist critique offered in this work to highlight Adichie's contributions to current feminist literary activism and scholarship.

**Key words:** Gender activism, Feminism, Literary Criticism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Cultural Criticism.

### Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an ethnos Nigerian women writer was born on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1977 in Enugu, Nigeria. She was the fifth of six youngsters to her ethnos oldsters Grace Ifeoma and James Nwoye Adichie. Whereas the family's ancestral town is Abba in Anambra State, Chimamanda grew up in Nsukka, within the house antecedently occupied by Nigerian author, Chinua Achebe. Her father is currently retired, worked at the University of Federal Republic of Nigeria that is found in Nsukka. He was Nigeria's first faculty member of Statistics, and later became Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. Her mother was the primary feminine registrar of constant establishment.

When she was at the age of 19, Chimamanda left for the United States, she gained a scholarship to review communication at Drexel University in Philadelphia for two years and she went on to pursue a degree in Communication and social science at Japanese Connecticut State University. In 1998, Adichie's play *For Love of Biafra* was revealed in Federal Republic of Nigeria. She later fired it as "an awfully melodramatic play", however it had been among the earliest works during which she explored the war within the late Nineteen Sixties between Federal Republic of Nigeria and its advocate Biafra republic. She later wrote many short stories concerning the conflict, which might become the topic of her extremely undefeated novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* within the year 2006. As a student at Japanese Connecticut State University, she began writing her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* within the year 2003.

*Purple Hibiscus* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize in the year 2004 and the Jon Llewellyn Rhys Prize, long listed for the Booker Prize and the winner of the Hurston or Wright

Legacy award for debut fiction. Her short fiction has been published in literary journals including *Granta*, and won the International PEN or David Wong award in 2003. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel and fourth book named, *Americanah* was first published in the year 2013. She was the winner of the National Book critics Fiction Award in the year of its publication.

Adichie has also published poetry and has a growing list of political essays and lectures including the well-received *The Danger of a Single Story* and *We Should All Be Feminists*. The latter was sampled by the renowned American pop singer, Beyoncé Knowles in her 2013 song, 'Flawless' and was sported on T-shirts in a top-class Christian Dior fashion show in the year 2016. It has been published as a short book that was distributed to all 16-year-old high school girls in Sweden in 2015.

Adichie follows an established tradition among African women writers who confront patriarchal power structures using literature as 'a weapon'. This literary tradition can be traced to the earliest novels by African women such as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* which is written in the year 1966, the first novel to be published in English by an African woman. *Efuru's* title character is an industrious colonial-era woman who survives life's vicissitudes on her own despite being abandoned by successive husbands. Other pioneer African female writers whose works provide strong feminist critique include Ghana's Ama Ata Aidoo's debut play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* in the year 1964 and Senegal's Mariama Ba's epistolary novel, *So Long A Letter* in the year 1980 explores the effects of polygamy on educated women in early postcolonial Muslim-dominated Senegalese society. Two important writers whose works were published between the late 1970s and the 1980s are Nigeria's Buchi Emecheta best known novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* in the year 1979 and Zimbabwe's Tsitsi Dangamrembga, whose semi-autobiographical novel, *Nervous Conditions* in the year 1988 won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989.

These writers uncover the various ways in which women are silenced and dominated by prevailing cultural, religious and economic practices. They invariably give narrative voice and visibility to fictional female characters, some of which operate in quasi-autobiographical ways, to articulate both subtly and unsubtly recognisable feminist ideas that many ordinary women may be unable to express in real life. Moreover, in the transnational and globalised context of late postcoloniality, African women writers face similar challenges as black writers in the West; a situation that has been described as 'double colonisation'. Indeed, contemporary African feminist literature pays attention to the specific lived experiences of African women within their diverse historical, economic, socio-political, and cultural contexts in similar ways as the black feminist movement in the United States, triggered by the twin struggles and racism and sexism, had, as its central principle, a feminism rooted in class, culture, gender and race realities of black American women.

There are serious contestations over the common practice of historicizing modern feminism in terms of three waves from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century onwards. The second wave is associated with the civil rights movements of the 1960s in the

United States while the third is strongly tied to postcolonial and postmodern ideas. A putative fourth wave is often described as post-feminism, which Fien Adriaens in the year 2009 defines as a contradictory, pluralistic discourse that is mainly located in the academy, a new, critical way of understanding the changed relations between feminism, popular culture and femininity. Important gender theorists from Nigeria whose ideas generally intersect with postcolonial and postmodern feminisms include Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in Stiwanism, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in African Womanism is credited with the concept of the ‘non-gendered Yoruba family’.

Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah* is, arguably, the most complex and overt feminist character in Adichie’s three novels. Adichie has stated that she deliberately deviated from the more cautious and subtle form of social commentary her previous novels in order to offer a more directly didactic intervention on the social issues that the novel contemplates. Ifemelu is a young Nigerian lady who immigrates to the United States where she gets a university education and becomes a successful blogger and speaker on race and immigration before returning to Nigeria. In this short section, I demonstrate how the novel’s representation of Ifemelu’s femininity can be understood in terms of post-feminist contradictions within the overlapping contexts of postcolonialism, migration, and globalisation.

Desperate for work soon after her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu agrees to fondle the genitals of a strange man in the name of ‘work’. This traumatises her and causes her to stop communicating with Obinze, her long-time boyfriend in Nigeria. During this time, she has two other romantic relationships, first with Curt, a rich white businessman, and then with Blaine, an African-American lecturer. Her relationship with Curt ends after she cheats on him with a shabby-dressed neighbour, for whom she had no real feelings. When she breaks up with Blaine, she returns to Nigeria and re-unites with the now married Obinze, who leaves his wife to be with Ifemelu. The twists and turns in these relationships especially the sexual aspects map Ifemelu’s psycho-social development to self-assured femininity.

The encounter with the tennis coach reflects the oppressive socio-economic structures against which first-wave or classical feminism rallied, her self-loathing afterwards signals a crucial step on her path to emotional independence. As Jennifer Leetsch in the year 2017 has also demonstrated, Adichie creatively uses Ifemelu’s romantic relationships in at least three ways as ‘material practice, as embodied experience, and as a discursive and textual construct’ to provide ‘a productive interruption of [social] norms,’ not only in regard to gender relations but also race relations in a transnational postcolonial literary context.

Perhaps the most important moment in the reinvention of Ifemelu’s femininity is her argument with Curt after confessing to him that she had cheated with their neighbour, Rob. When Curt suggested, angrily, that she had given Rob “what he wanted”, Ifemelu felt insulted, retorting: “I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, it was accidental” (Adichie, 2013: 288). Her retort is significant as it signals a rejection of the assumptions that the male is invariably in control of the female body and female sexual desire. Ifemelu’s retort highlights a critical tenet of third-wave feminism, namely the assertion of feminine sexual agency through claiming

ownership and control ownership, not only of female sexuality, but also of the transactional processes of sexual and romantic relations desire, intention, and outcome.

This is reinforced, symbolically, by the details of the two occasions she met Rob. Her subsequent relationships follow a similar pattern of ‘taking’ what she ‘wanted’ from the men in her life, on her own terms, especially when she re-unites with the married Obinze after returning to Nigeria. Yet, an important contradiction arises from the context of Ifemelu’s capricious affair with Rob which leads, expectedly, to the end of her loving stable relationship with Curt: “She loved [Curt], and the spirited easy life she gave her, and yet she often fought the urge to create rough edges, to squash his sunniness, even just a little” (287).

There is, therefore, a sense in which Ifemelu’s sexual experimentation resonates with the problematic neo-liberal discourses of narcissist consumer cultures with renewed interest in sexuality and individualism as well as the commodification of the body in general and the female body in particular. In her attempt to redefine feminism for the African context, Adichie describes herself as “a Happy African Feminist” or 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, 2012:10). An immediate contradiction here is the perhaps unwitting description of femininity using the same representational codes associated, not only with sexist constructions of gender, but also with the objectification and commodification of females. Kouame Adou has argued in this regard that Adichie’s attempt to redefine African feminism to a Western or global audience using her lived experiences of Nigerian cultural practices is weakened by the problems of cultural translation which has produced gaps in theorisation. These limitations notwithstanding, Adichie’s literary works, as well as her rising profile as socio-political commentator and fashionista represent significant contributions to contemporary gender studies and feminist activism within and beyond Africa.

African writers have a duty to use their works to contribute actively to the reshaping of their respective societies and cultures. There is therefore a noticeable shift in narrative voice in the majority of recent African novels which explore the range of themes such as identity, migration, power, globalisation that animate postcolonial discourses. While earlier African novels and novelists offered predominantly masculinist and gerontocratic views on decolonisation and nationalism, contemporary texts increasingly give voice to marginal subjects especially children, youths and females.

## Conclusion

Adichie’s three award-winning novels *Purple Hibiscus* in the year 2003, *Half of a Yellow Sun* in the year 2006 and *Americanah* in the year 2013 are arguably representative of the more accomplished and influential texts within contemporary African literary production. While these novels have been recognised for a variety of reasons, their attention to feminist issues through robust engagement with the plight of female characters remains remarkable. Operating as veritable forms of cultural critique, Adichie’s novels represent substantial contributions to feminist activism and gender studies both on a global scale and within the specific contexts of postcolonial societies in recent years.

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