

Engagements with Feminism: An Intersectional Approach in Adichie's *Dear Ijeawele or A Feminist Manifesto*

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Abstract: *Feminism is a power-oriented discourse which actively interrogates the multiple levels of oppression, identifies the problems and brings forth different perspectives of realities. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's views on feminism is a representation of her personal reflections of being a woman in both Nigerian and American context. Her book, Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions (2017) is a pragmatic work which addresses women who have the potential to upbringing young girls with a vision and how to combat gender imbalance in society. Adichie's standpoint is that all women are not feminists and all men are not misogynists. Through fifteen suggestions Adichie upholds a balanced overview of feminism, discusses key feminist issues such as division of domestic labour, use of gendered language, body politics, gender roles and makes an urgent move towards empowerment of women. The paper analyses the work through the theoretical lens of intersectionality, which is based on the premise that individuals with diverse identities experience oppression and privilege at the same time. This approach erases the gender biases and fill historical gaps and inequalities. Further the intersectional lens researches historical contexts surrounding women's inequality. Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and Adichie's work resonate for an inclusionary and transformative practice through collective solidarity. Structured in the form of a letter, Adichie's work serve as a bridge and map to her own feminist thinking. The text travels within the realm of a Feminist world through the voice of woman to woman and mother to daughter. Twenty First century's voice for feminism is appropriated through Adichie's personal suggestions which would definitely pave way for a fairer world for both women and men.*

Key Words: *Feminism, Intersectionality, Gender biases, Gender roles and Identity.*

To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its effectivity; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependance that constructs the colonial subject (both colonizer and colonized)
(Homi Bhabha, *The Other Question*, 1983)

INTRODUCTION:

The expediting gender differences and restricted privileges of women in career, education and household chores urge feminists towards a dynamic involvement of women in society paving way to traverse the gaps in gender inequality. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *A Feminist Manifesto* uplifts women from assigned gender roles to more inclusive gender neutral roles. The work reflects the feminist raising of her childhood friend's daughter, Chizalum amidst the world of inequality through fifteen subsections in epistolary form. Adichie describes

her journey from unfolding the “meaning of feminist in the dictionary to first calling herself ‘A Happy Feminist’, later ‘A Happy African Feminist’ and finally, light heartedly, ‘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” (*We Should All be Feminists*). The varied challenges raised by feminists form the basis of Manifesto and women disenfranchisement, stereotyping and commodification are appropriately represented by Adichie. In the words of Etim:

The men-women binary indicates the relationship between post-postcolonialism and gender. The liberation of the woman is central to the liberation of Africa as far as the post-postcolonial theory is concerned. We must not repeat the mistake of the past – the mistake of the men marching forward and leaving the women trailing behind. It is a journey that is doomed from the beginning. In the post-postcolonial era in African literary criticism, the role of the woman in aiding the liberation of Africa cannot be trifled with. Men and women must move in unison, hand-in-hand, failure of which failure will continue dogging our path (“Post- Postcolonialism” 7).

The deprivation of women’s selfhood by tradition and culture, gender and patriarchy accentuate imbalances in society. Kate Millett argued in *Sexual Politics* that interior colonization of women by men is the worst form of exclusion. Adichie writes, she is angrier about sexism than she is about racism. Judith Bennet in *Patriarchy and Challenge of Feminism* observes that African women have faced gender discrimination over the ages due to patriarchy and sexism.

Objectives of the study

The landmark feminist texts like *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer, *Feminism is for Everybody* by bell hooks address feminism in varying shades but Adichie’s *Dear Ijeawele* is specifically written for new generation of feminists and to mould them in the best possible ways. The paper clearly sets its objectives:

- To analyse the comprehensive outline and introduction to feminism through suggestions
- To comprehend the gap between disparities or inequalities in the world governing women through anecdotes
- To narrow down imbalances in gender formulations and
- To accelerate social change through inclusionary and visionary ways
- To interlink intertextuality with feminism

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY:

Intersectionality:

The Black Feminist legal scholar, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw introduced the theory of Intersectionality. Its antecedents include the notions of ‘double jeopardy’ (Beal) or ‘multiple jeopardy’ (King), and ‘interlocking oppressions’ (Combahee River Collective). The theoretical conceptualization of the dominant modes of oppression, formation of multiple identities and social positioning in accordance with the hegemonic distribution of power and opportunities come within the purview of Intersectionality. The feminist theorists employed intersectionality as a metaphor and research paradigm to explore varied concepts like inclusion, endurance, convolution and synchronism. Intersectionality theory has been acknowledged as “the most important contribution that Women’s Studies has made so far” (Mc Call 1971). In an interview, Crenshaw notes:

[M]y own use of the term ‘intersectionality’ was just a metaphor. [...] I was simply looking at the way all of these systems of oppression overlap. But more importantly, how in the process of that structural convergence rhetorical politics and identity politics

– based on the idea that systems of subordination do not overlap – would abandon issues and causes and people who actually were affected by overlapping systems of subordination (Crenshaw qtd. in Guidroz and Berger 65).

Intersectionality thus transcends the single definitions of exploitation which caters to sex and race as mutually co-related aspects and brings gendered racism visible. Theory of Intersectionality in the words of Crenshaw operates through three channels of invisibility like historical invisibility (misrepresentation in the historical narrative), cultural invisibility (failure to capture cultural experiences of subordinate groups) and political invisibility (neglect by advocacy groups). This theory provides resistance to the multidimensionality of hegemony and Crenshaw identifies three pillars of intersectional analysis:

Firstly, racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct types of oppression ie racial subordination reinforces sexual subordination and vice versa. Secondly, Black women are often marginalized by politics of either gender or race alone. Thirdly, a response to each form of subordination must be at the same time a response to both forms of subordination. (Crenshaw 1991)

Feminist Theory

This theory claims that women's lives are conditioned by manifold interconnected systems of domination and protest the act of excluding women through political arguments. To Lois Tyson, "Feminist Theory is concerned with the way in which literature strengthens or reduces the economic, political, social and psychological oppressions of women" (83). Oppression neither becomes a single-handed process nor binary political system but is governed by diverse, interconnected and intersecting systems. The fourth wave feminism upholds the practice of intersectionality and claims that women's oppression is not confined within the prism of gender alone. Intersectionality, offered as a theoretical and political remedy addresses "the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions" (Davis 70). Feminist theory includes intersections like gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Intersectional Feminism follows a structured analysis and praxis to alleviate sexism and patriarchal oppression by focusing and detecting junctures of injustice. The feminist authors like Kimberle Crenshaw and Patricia Hill write about Intersectional Feminism and in "Mapping the Margins", Crenshaw mentions that because of the "intersectional identity of both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (1244).

ANALYSIS OF A FEMINIST MANIFESTO:

The first suggestion circles around full personhood, which is a prerequisite that a mother should ensure for her daughter to be raised as a feminist. Confidence and self-fulfillment are the greatest gifts that a mother can offer to a child. She also asserts the idea that motherhood is a glorious gift but a woman must know in its fullest that motherhood and work are not her concern alone. As per the second suggestion, parents deserve special gratitude in upbringing a child and mothers need not condition themselves to take the entire responsibility to nurture the child. Adichie wants mothers to arrest perfectionism and demands sharing of child care for the smooth functioning of a family. Adichie's third suggestion establishes gender roles as absolute nonsense. She was against assigning domestic work to women alone and rejects "pink-blue binary". It is clearly stated that gender roles curb the potential of the children so they must be taught self-reliance from the early age itself. Adichie attacks "Feminism Lite" or conditioned female equality through her fourth suggestion. The vehement opposition against male superiority and the language of "allowing" are brought out when she says; "A husband is not a headmaster. A wife is not a school girl. Permission and being allowed, when used one-

sidedly-and they are nearly only used that way- should never be the language of an equal marriage” (11).

The value and worth of reading for self-expression and interrogation with the world shape a child to a greater extent as per fifth suggestion. She quotes a Nigerian woman, Angela encouraged her child to read by paying 5 cents per page- “An expensive endeavour...but a worthy investment” (11). Language is not merely to communicate with others so mothers should teach children to question language at sometimes; “language is the repository of our prejudices, our beliefs, our assumptions...What are the things that women cannot do because they are women?” (12). Sixth suggestion clearly emphasizes the need to question men who cannot see women as equal humans; “women actually don’t need to be championed and revered; they just need to be treated as equal human beings” (12). Through seventh suggestion Adichie criticizes her standpoint that a woman should never speak of her marriage as an achievement; “we condition girls to aspire to marriage and we do not condition boys to aspire to marriage” (13). This an example for terrible imbalance to Adichie; for marriage alters the social status of woman and there is nothing wrong if a woman travels with her name, the name assigned to her at birth all throughout life without adding husband’s name or title ‘Mrs’.

Eight suggestion exhorts woman to reject likeability. Girls are to be treated as subjects who deserve the right to like or dislike and they need to be encouraged to open up their minds. Adichie says unfortunately “we have a world full of women who are unable to exhale fully because they have been conditioned to fold themselves in to shapes to make themselves likeable” (14). Ninth suggestion speaks about the significance of identity and dignity in a person’s life. Identity and culture are closely interlinked aspects. It also involves the assigning of African names to African children due to its semantic and philosophical significance. Black women’s valuation and celebration of African names is essential because “names better than any other language form reflect various social and other attitudes and relationships, social barriers and the way in which social groups behave towards languages and other aspects of society” (Neethling 2000). The history of Africa and Black Diaspora are something that an Igbo child must take pride of; “Let her grow up to think of herself as among other things, a proud Igbo woman” (15). A person grown in Igbo culture should embrace its beauty and reject unlikeable aspects which curbs the freedom and limits of women. Tenth suggestion put forward the ways by which a mother can fruitfully engage her child. The girl child must be encouraged to participate in sports, to be fashionable as she likes and never try to associate appearance with morality. Children get influenced through examples; hence Adichie asks mothers to introduce the list of feminist inspiration like American feminist Florynce Kennedy, African woman like Ama Ata Aidoo, Dora Akunyili and Muthoni Likimani. Great men should also be introduced to the child along with great women. The culture’s selective use of biology as determining factor for social norm should be erased at all costs says Adichie through eleventh suggestion. “A Yoruba woman is forced to name her child with Igbo name after her husband...A child first belongs to the father. It has to be that way” (17). Even the women who are harshly conditioned by the social norms think of their children only as that of fathers’. Adichie’s advice to such women is that biology should never become an indicator for any social norms. Twelfth suggestion breaks the idea that sex should not be communicated to children at their young age. She opposes cultures and religions which try to control women’s bodies; “Periods are normal and natural and the human species would not be here if periods did not exist” (18). Thirteenth suggestion speaks of romance as a balanced way of give and take; “Teach her that to love she must give of herself emotionally but she must also expect to be given to” (19). Adichie hates addressing oppressed group as saints through fourteenth suggestion. She advocates property rights for Nigerian women as their sole rights. She suggested that female goodness is as normal as female evil and not all women are feminists and not all men are misogynists. The importance

of differences matters a lot in a person's life and this is the last suggestion put forward by Adichie. "Teach her not to attach value to difference, as difference is the reality of our world. By teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse world" (20).

SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

Feminist Manifesto dismantles the prevailing notions of Western feminist writings which focused more on mainstream sections and tries to incorporate the everyday lives and experiences of women across the globe. The concrete, practical and fundamental overview of feminism is provided at large. The strong belief that the younger generation of women are good at educating the girls about gender inequalities also comes within the purview of Adichie's agenda. As the Guardian states, "Some of the suggestions feel like mountains of difficulty made simple" (Hadley 2017). Through engaging audience with examples and stories Adichie deviates from the conventional path with an alternative vision; "educating girls sooner regarding gender equality buffers them from the influence of gendered stereotypes" (Goyal 2018).

CONCLUSION:

The concept of intersectionality renders a promising theoretical tool in the world of feminism through its intellectual engagement and integrity. This feminist strategy empowers woman to move beyond the patriarchal order deconstructing conventional hierarchies. Influenced by Critical race Theory and present-day Feminism, Adichie exhorts the community of women to counter, dissent and tackle oppression. "Adichie constructs and articulates her notion of feminism closer to a circumspection global feminism had yet to emancipate into" (Rafapa). The accomplishment of Adichie's vision and mission for Black women empowerment draws their voices from periphery to center in the era of postcolonialism. Ross C Murfin has rightly observed "evolution of feminism into feminisms has fostered a more inclusive global perspective" (301-2). The Manifesto clearly builds coalitions among those facing multiple subordination especially within the family. From the embedded status of women in submissiveness and silence, Adichie's mission is to carve them the path of survival. Adichie's work becomes a landmark treatise for the upcoming generations to follow, imbibe and cherish for a harmonious co-existence.

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