

**IDENTITY POLITICS APPRAISEMENT IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN
LITERARY DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI
ADICHIE'S *WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS***

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ABSTRACT

This study is an appraisal of the issue of identity politics in contemporary African literary discourse in the autobiographical essay of the Nigerian female writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – *We Should All Be Feminists*. It is an attempt to document how the Nigerian essayist examines the question of identity politics which is experiencing a surge in recent postcolonial times. The textual analysis of this study is based on the feminist discourse parameters of identity politics appraisal in the context of some indexes of identity such as gender and cultural politics. It shows that identity is a dynamic thematic concern and process which evolves with societal changes. For Adichie, such a movement of identity politics as feminism in postcolonial African society needs to readjust its scope and build identity politics that meets the realities of the changing world. And the meaning of identity should be context-dependent and not fixed. Findings reveal that identity politics is undergoing a perpetual surge in accordance with the progress of human society. The paper concludes, therefore, that identity politics in its modern form in Adichie's perspective and prescription should be an emancipatory mode of political action and thinking that transcend narrow identities to embrace common humanity. This work is expected to contribute to the growing body of literature that seeks to offer meaning to the notion of identity in this increasingly globalized world.

Keywords: Identity politics, Postcolonial, Appraisal, Gender, Literary discourse, Feminists.

INTRODUCTION

Since its coming into prominence in the 1980s, the concept of identity politics has become a central concept for scientific inquiry be it in the social sciences or the humanities. Its meaning has, however, changed dramatically within these current postcolonial times. According to Prakash Karat, (2011, p. 41) “identity politics means individuals are defined by their identity based on race, ethnicity, gender, language or religion or whatever identity that person perceives to be his identity”. Today, the concept of identity politics is used to describe such phenomena as feminist movement, ethnic alliances, religious fundamentalism, and nationalist movements in postcolonial Africa. In this context, the seeds of much of the work of recent postcolonial times focus on issues like racial, cultural and gender identity which spark serious discussion in many scholarly fields of investigation.

Forcing itself into the study of contemporary society, the concept of identity politics seems to be experiencing an eye-catching surge. This attention-grabbing surge of the notion of identity politics and its related issues leads many postcolonial scholars, academics and writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to decry it as a divisive politics which highlights the depths of institutionalized marginality such as female gender subjugation edited by patriarchy in postcolonial African society at large. However, focusing herself more specifically on the contextual experience of her post-independent Nigerian society, Adichie worries about the obsession with identity politics, structured along axes of gender and culture which only deepens the divides that exist between men and women in her ‘autobiographical essay’¹ – *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014).

Nonetheless, identity politics deserves critical assessment and clarification as it keeps on playing an outstanding part in the way people in various groupings name, identify and construct their subjectivity. Therefore, it is the point of this study to critically review Adichie’s non-fiction text: *We Should All Be Feminists*², with the goal to examine the issue of identity politics in current postcolonial climate with reference to two key indexes of identity – gender and culture. The study also aims at reforming the traditional idiosyncrasy of identity politics in Nigerian society. It tries to rework feminist critique of gender identity in postcolonial Nigeria.

¹ In his article, “Storying the Self in Nigerian Gender Discourse: A Critical Evaluation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists*”, Kouamé Adou demonstrates that *We Should All Be Feminists* is an autobiographical essay through the distinction between narrative mode of representation translated by artistic rhetoric of “showing” vs. inartistic rhetoric of “telling” (p. 89).

² *We Should All Be Feminists* will be henceforth referred as **WSABF** for short in quotation.

Finally, the study calls for a global feminist identity. From these set objectives, the study tries to answer the following questions: What approach of identity politics does Adichie claim in her non-fiction feminist text? Why does the author devote an increasing attention to construct an identity politics in the mold of postcolonial African feminism? What vision of identity politics does she represent? To answer the main question hoisted in this study, the analysis will successively deal with the reformation of traditional idiosyncrasy of identity, the reworking of feminist critique of gender identity and the call for a global feminist identity.

1. The Reformation of the Traditional Idiosyncrasy of Identity

The traditional teaching of the idiosyncrasy of identity in Nigerian society centers mostly on the differences between individuals according to gender. In such a society governed or ordered by gender, the life experiences associated with this gender categorization cannot but engender diverse perspectives and yearnings. In *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie attempts to reform this traditional idiosyncrasy of identity based on gender order by prescribing a new idiosyncrasy of identity politics in her appraisal of the issue of gender identity in the Nigerian society. She is of the opinion that traditional theories of identity structured along axes of gender and culture to represent the binary paradigms between men and women on the social terrace of her native Nigeria, suffer from the handicap of marginality and injustice. She writes that “gender as it functions today is a grave injustice” (WSABF, p. 21). As argued in this quotation, Adichie senses that in the appraisal of gender issues in the context of the traditional formulation of identity codes in Nigeria, the perspectives and yearning of female citizenry have been scheduled in the shadow of a marginal agenda. From this standpoint, their positionality has been the most invisible and “their voices unheard, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space” (Lloyd Brown, 1981: 3), in the society in which they live as human beings.

Furthermore, Adichie explains her perception of gender as ‘grave injustice’ by substantiating that socialization is the root cause of the categorization of genders into masculine and feminine subjects where “masculinity is the mode of the oppressor and femininity that of the oppressed” (Walby, 1990: 93). For Adichie, masculine and feminine identities are the result of a process of socialization because “we are all social beings” and “we internalize ideas from our socialization” (WSABF, p. 30). However, Adichie believes that in the establishment of the conventional gendered culture “we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise girls to cater to the fragile egos of males” (WSABF, p.27). She suggests that in the social context of

her native Nigeria, the traditional theories of gender socialization do much disservice to female by operating with a static and unitary conception of gender idiosyncrasy which discriminates against females. This gendered culture is actively constructed in all areas of social life, such as families, media and school exercising pressure and coercion on female individuals.

As gendered culture is well-ensconced in all areas of Nigerian social life, Adichie observes an unjustifiable patriarchal essentialism about gender idiosyncrasy in reading the traditional formulation of the semiotics of identity in her native society. She observes that “the problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are” (WSABF, p. 34). For Adichie, it is the weight of pre-established gender expectations which reinforce the assumptions of ‘grave injustice’ because they give taxonomic prescriptions and duties to perform.

In such a context, Adichie gives new definition to the identity codes to challenge the traditional formulation of identity paradigms in order to meet the realities of the postcolonial climate. In her endeavor of defining gender identity in new perspectives, she frontally attacks the traditional norms and cultures that constitute the seeds and pillars of gender politics in her society. She asserts that the construction of gender subjectivity built around sexual categorization in the ideological machine of patriarchy establishes the male as gender ruler and the female as subordinate. She argues that the codification of gender identity in such a model reinforces traditional patriarchal essentialist doctrine in which men lay siege to the center and conversely women hover at the margin. Adichie believes that time has come to change the conversation about patriarchal gender system “because of changes in policy and law, which are very important” (WSABF, p. 36) for the recognition of universal human values.

2. Reworking Feminist Critique of Gender in Postcolonial Nigeria

Adichie discovers through her appraisal of identity politics in postcolonial Nigeria that patriarchal curriculum about identity construction is unbalanced, ideologically-driven and systematically hostile to the legacy of women agency. In fact, insisting on the pertinence of gender as an analytical category, Adichie challenges any status identity built on patriarchal heritage. She argues that in Nigeria the consideration of women as status identity or identity group constitutes the foundations of oppression because patriarchy imposes some falsely universalized status identity norms that are detrimental to women agency.

Approaching the issue at hand from a postcolonial analytical perspective, Adichie hones her critical thinking skills to correct the unbalanced norms and canons embedded in Nigerian traditional patriarchal culture and civilization. For Adichie, it is wrong-headed to apply the old patriarchal postulations according to which “men rule the world” (WSABF, p. 17) in current postcolonial setting because “today we live in a vastly different world” and “we have evolved” (p. 18). To debunk these old patriarchal curriculums about gender identity she advocates a new variant of postcolonial feminism called “happy feminism” that offers alternatives to gender politics in Nigeria. She revises the cardinal axiom of feminism because she believes that the word “feminist and the idea of feminism itself is limited by stereotypes” (WSABF, p. 3). In this context, she poignantly expressed the theoretical formulation of her new variant of feminism in these lines:

So, I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist. Then, an academic, a Nigerian woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African (...) Anyway, since feminism was un-African, I decided I would now call myself Happy African Feminist. Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be 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. (WSABF, p. 9-10).

A close critical assessment of the passage above clearly sets the beacon of Adichie’s feminist reasoning. This attempt of naming of her feminist standpoint within the vast field of feminist consciousness reveals that “identity politics must be seen as the activism engaged in by status-based social movement” (Bernstein, 2005, p. 48). For the Nigerian essayist, the dominant discourse about gender identity and feminist identity must be challenged because it is limited by stereotypes.

As feminist identity and the idea of feminism itself in African society is limited by stereotypes, Adichie refines feminist consciousness by incorporating feminist rhetoric which occludes the pristine and conventional conceptualization of women as culturally, socially and economically disempowered. The theoretical formulation of happy feminist consciousness expressed in *We Should All Be Feminists* encompasses a social change perspective ideology that extends to the issue of writing off gender marginality. Through the establishment of “happy African feminist” identity as a social movement identity for both men and women, Adichie develops a feminist argument that embodies a humanistic consciousness which is geared towards creating and building structures of inclusiveness and positive networking assemblages and partnership from anywhere in a peaceful and harmonizing network. In this regard, we argue

that Adichie's feminist assumption is resonant for all humankind, both men and women who are searching for alternatives to gender identity and subjectivity in postcolonial African society.

3. "*We Should All Be Feminists*": a Clarion Call For Global Feminist Identity

Feminism as identities movement is subject to a myriad of critical assessments in the field of postcolonial literature. For Juliana Nfah-Abbeneyi, "there is no one "unified" feminist theory, but rather feminist theories that offer diverse and differing voices within feminism(s)" (Nfah-Abbeneyi, 1997, p.19). The above definition of feminism as identities movement is given a forward motion by Judith Butler when she claims that "no one stands in the perspective that might afford a global view of feminism" and "no one stands within a definition of feminism that would remain uncontested" (Butler, 2004, p. 174). Some other feminist thinkers like Alice Walker, Buchi Emecheta, Ogundipe-Leslie Molar and Were Were Liking refuse the identity label "feminist". For these feminist thinkers, there cannot be unanimity or unified consensus about a global view of feminism.

The fundamental outline of the above feminist discourses of identity politics is completely at odd with that of Adichie. For the Nigerian theorist, there can be a global view about feminism as identities movement. She theorizes a feminist standpoint of identity politics which looks for setting agenda that goes beyond nomenclature of status identities based on gender or culture as a unidimensional signifier of identity politics. Through her catchy title "*We Should All Be Feminists*", she intentionally draws the map of her feminist thinking. Adichie believes that it is morally urgent to have honest conversations about feminist identity in African society in order to challenge stereotypes.

To begin with, Adichie defines what she means by feminist her identity politics appraisal in these lines:

My own definition of a feminist is a man or a woman who says, Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better'. *All of us, women and men, must do better.*" (WSABF, P. 48).

Drawing inference from the above definition of Adichie's feminist theoretical formulation, it becomes apparent that the reasoning emanating from her variant of feminism technically embraces Alice Walker's womanist philosophies which provide an avenue to foster the relationships between black women and black men. Alice Walker's womanism furnishes a

visionary meaning which broadens the notion of humanity to complement all people regardless of gender politics.

Walker sums up her vision by stating that womanists are “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (Walker, 1983, p. xi). This womanist consciousness corroborates Adichie’s feminist interest which lies in providing equal opportunities, rights and respect to both genders. So, for the Nigerian feminist, we must fix the problem of gender by rejecting all forms of marginality, oppression and subjugation, and provide an avenue to foster commitment to social justice.

The exploration of feminist identity as global identity in Adichie’s essay stands on the premise that culture determines the social codes and norms for all people. But the paradox is that “culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture” (WSABF, p. 46). As ‘people make culture’, for Adichie it is high time for the Nigerian society and to some extent the African society at large to re-structure the cultural codes and signs that build people’s identity. She has a global vision of all humanity and campaigns for the complete equality, mutuality, partnership and complementarities between both genders in every way.

CONCLUSION

The analysis in this study has been devoted to the appraisal of the issue of identity politics in contemporary African literary discourse in the autobiographical essay, *We Should All Be Feminists*, by the Nigerian female writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The study brings to light that identity is a dynamic thematic concern and process which evolves with societal changes. For Adichie, such a movement of identity politics as feminism in postcolonial African society needs to be “always contextual” (Adichie, 2017, p.7), and readjust its scope by building identity politics that meets the realities of the changing world. In other words, for the Nigerian essayist, the meaning of identity should be context-dependent and not fixed. Findings reveal that identity politics is in a perpetual change in accordance with the progress of human society. The paper concludes that Adichie’s perspective and prescription of identity politics in modern times should be an emancipatory mode of political action and thinking that transcend narrow identities to embrace common humanity. This common humanity is translated through happy feminist consciousness which shows a universal arc of political, social, cultural and economic

concerns for both genders. It is finally committed to creating structures of inclusiveness, mutuality, equality and partnership between both gender categories.

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