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Rethinking Equality: The Illusion of Everyday Gender Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*

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Abstract: Contemporary discourse on gender equality often emphasizes the advancements made through women's increasing participation in education, employment, and public life. Nonetheless, daily interactions in society frequently demonstrate that subtle gender norms persist in influencing perceptions of authority, behavior, and social value. Despite increasing academic interest in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminist literature, there has been limited focus on how her essay *We Should All Be Feminists* exposes the enduring nature of gender norms in everyday social interactions. This paper analyses how Adichie's essay illustrates quotidian gender politics and contests the prevalent belief that gender equality has been attained in modern society. The study specifically examines how the narrative incidents in the essay demonstrate the persistent impact of culturally ingrained gender stereotypes. The research utilizes a qualitative textual analysis of Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*, referencing significant feminist theoretical frameworks such as Simone de Beauvoir's notion of gender as a social construct, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Judith Lorber's interpretation of gender as a social institution, and bell hooks' critique of patriarchal power structures. These theoretical frameworks are utilized to analyse certain narrative instances from the essay and the original TEDxEuston Talk. The analysis demonstrates that Adichie's narratives unveil enduring gender assumptions in quotidian interactions, especially about leadership roles, economic power, social recognition, and expectations related to marriage and gender behavior. The study concludes that the essay reveals the illusion of equality, wherein apparent social progress coexists with subtle cultural practices that perpetuate gender hierarchy in modern society.

Keywords: gender politics; feminist theory; everyday gender norms; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; illusion of equality.

Introduction

In present world, discussions regarding gender equality frequently highlight the substantial advancements made in recent decades. Women currently engage actively in education, employment, and public life in ways that were formerly constrained. These observable achievements often foster the perception that gender inequality has been predominantly addressed. Nonetheless, underlying this ostensible advancement, nuanced



cultural expectations and societal attitudes persist in influencing the comprehension and experience of gender in quotidian life.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is considered a preeminent figure in current feminist discourse. Adichie, a Nigerian novelist, essayist, and public intellectual, often examines topics of gender, identity, culture, and power in both African and global contexts. Her essay *We Should All Be Feminists* originated from a TEDxEuston talk delivered in 2012, which achieved international acclaim and was subsequently published as an essay in 2014. In this essay, Adichie integrates personal experiences with social critique to analyse the persistent impact of gender expectations on daily life. Rather than depicting feminism as an abstract theoretical notion, Adichie demonstrates how gender roles function through commonplace social interactions and cultural practices.

Adichie's insights expose a significant inconsistency in modern gender discourse. Although contemporary societies regularly commend women's accomplishments and advocate for equality, daily encounters frequently perpetuate conventional beliefs on gender roles. This contradiction engenders an illusion of equality—the prevalent notion that gender equality has been attained, despite the enduring presence of nuanced gender hierarchies.

The present article analyses Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* as a literary and cultural critique of modern gender politics. This study utilizes feminist theoretical viewpoints and examines personal anecdotes from the essay to investigate how Adichie reveals the persistent impact of gender norms in daily social interactions. This study contends that Adichie's work disputes the view that gender equality has been fully realized, instead illuminating the persistence of gender norms in contemporary life.

Literature Review

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* has garnered academic interest for its clear expression of feminist concepts and its accessibility. Researchers analysing the text frequently emphasize its significance in contemporary feminist discourse. Heather Hewett positions Adichie among the burgeoning cohort of Nigerian authors whose writings address current social and cultural issues while broadening the parameters of African literary dialogue. Hewett claims that Adichie's writing embodies an intriguing viewpoint in African literature, confronting issues of identity, gender, and societal change within the framework of contemporary global society. By emphasizing women's perspectives and contesting patriarchal beliefs, Adichie enhances a wider literary movement aimed at reevaluating gender relations within African contexts.

Recent studies have concentrated on *We Should All Be Feminists* and its cultural importance. Pronita Roy analyses the essay as a medium that reinterprets feminism by articulating it in comprehensible and inclusive language. Roy asserts that Adichie's essay contests prevalent assumptions about feminism and underscores that feminism aims to dismantle gender inequalities rather than to establish female supremacy over males. Nora K. Angus similarly examines Adichie's TEDxEuston Talk and essay through a rhetorical lens, highlighting the significance of personal narrative in conveying feminist concepts. Angus asserts that Adichie adeptly utilizes narrative and personal tales to build a robust connection with her audience, enabling listeners to identify gender inequity through genuine experiences.

While these studies recognize the significance of Adichie's essay in advancing feminist consciousness and contesting gender stereotypes, the predominant scholarly focus remains on the rhetorical efficacy of the text or its function in reinterpreting feminism within modern discourse. This article addresses the gap by analysing *We Should All Be Feminists* through the



lens of typical gender politics. This study examines Adichie's own stories and lived experiences from the essay and original TEDxEuston Talk to investigate the persistence of gender norms in everyday social interactions. This paper presents the concept of the illusion of equality, which denotes the prevalent perception that gender equality has been attained, despite the ongoing existence of subtle gender hierarchies ingrained in daily social behaviours.

Methodology

This study makes use of qualitative textual analysis to explore Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminist*. This research focuses on understanding the textual instances along with personal anecdotes of Adichie presented in the essay and also in the original TED Talk. The analysis is strengthened by several key feminist theoretical frameworks, especially Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler's theory to figure out how gender norms are created and maintained through everyday social practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on essential feminist theoretical frameworks that analyse gender as a socially created structure of power and hierarchy. Feminist theorists contend that gender disparity arises not merely from biological variations but from cultural expectations, social structures, and institutional practices. The writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, bell hooks, and Judith Lorber offer significant theoretical frameworks for comprehending the construction and perpetuation of gender norms in society.

Simone de Beauvoir articulates a fundamental concept in feminist thought in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir contests the presumption that femininity is an inherent or biological state, asserting that gender identity is instead shaped by socialization. She famously asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (Beauvoir 352). Beauvoir additionally notes that "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself" (Beauvoir 28). This concept establishes male experience as the standard, while women are portrayed as the 'Other'. Beauvoir's theory underscores the historical foundations of patriarchal ideology, wherein social institutions and cultural narratives elevate male authority while marginalizing women's experiences.

Judith Butler elaborates on this comprehension of gender by presenting the notion of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that gender ought not to be perceived as a fixed or inherent identity. Gender is constructed through recurrent social behaviours and cultural performances. Butler asserts that

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. (Butler 179).

Butler elaborates on gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (Butler 43). Butler's theory is especially valuable for analysing how quotidian habits and societal expectations perpetuate gender stereotypes in routine interactions.

Judith Lorber similarly analyses gender as a social institution that structures daily social interactions. Lorber contends that gender is perpetually recreated through social interactions and cultural practices. She notes that "gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life" (Lorber 1). Lorber asserts that individuals are "born sexed but not gendered, and they have to be taught to be masculine or feminine" (Lorber 4). This viewpoint underscores the significance of socialization in the formation of gender identities and behaviours from early life onwards.



bell hooks further develop feminist theory by emphasizing the systemic nature of patriarchal power relations. hooks argues that feminism is a movement aimed at confronting and dismantling sexism and gender inequality. As she explains, “Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 7). Additionally, hooks [sic] notes that “males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy” (hooks 9). Her work highlights how patriarchal systems favour males while concurrently establishing expectations and constraints for both genders.

Results and Discussion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* illustrates that gender inequity frequently manifests through commonplace social interactions rather than explicit institutional discrimination. Adichie elucidates how gender norms mold societal behavior and affect individual perceptions of authority, identity, and value through personal anecdotes and quotidian experiences. The feminist theories of Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Judith Lorber, and bell hooks offer valuable foundations for comprehending how quotidian encounters perpetuate gender inequality.

One of the most illuminating examples in Adichie’s essay pertains to her formative experience in school when she aspired to be the class monitor. The teacher announced that the student with the greatest academic score will be awarded the position. Adichie excelled in the test and expected to secure the post; however, the teacher subsequently announced that the class monitor must be male. The teacher did not state this rule at first because she thought the monitor would be a man. This instance illustrates how gender expectations function as unspoken social norms. Adichie overtly challenges these inflexible assumptions when she states:

The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations. (Adichie 12)

Even when the criteria for leadership appeared to be merit-based, the final decision was shaped by deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles. Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender production elucidates this phenomenon. Beauvoir contends that “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 352), highlighting that femininity is not a biological fate but a social construct shaped by cultural expectations. Adichie’s example illustrates how the teacher's presumption that leadership is an attribute of boys exemplifies the societal construction of gender roles. Females are tacitly instructed that positions of power are not intended for them, whilst males are encouraged to assume such responsibilities. Beauvoir's assertion that "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself" (Beauvoir 28) further clarifies the situation. The teacher's decision proves the perception of male power as the standard norm within social institutions. The absence of Adichie from the leadership role exemplifies the overarching patriarchal mentality that prioritizes male dominance and diminishes female competence.

Similarly, Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity offers insight into this event. Butler contends that gender is not a static identity but is instead "an identity constituted in time tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 179). From this stance, societal practices that provide leadership roles to boys perpetuate the cultural enactment of masculinity as dominance. The teacher's decision reinforces a wider practice of recurrent societal behaviours that define masculinity as



leadership and femininity as subservience. Every occurrence of this action reinforces the misconception that these gender norms are inherent rather than socially constructed.

Adichie also exemplifies the persistence of gender preconceptions in an anecdote concerning her friend Louie during a visit to Lagos. Following the assistance from local labourers who aided in loading their vehicle, Adichie expressed gratitude by offering them money. Although Adichie provided the money to the labourer, the man expressed his gratitude to Louie rather than to her. The worker presumed that the money came from the male friend. This seemingly minor interaction shows how cultural norms link financial control and economic power to men. Judith Lorber's examination of gender as a social institution elucidates this issue. Lorber asserts that "gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life" (Lorber 1). The worker's response illustrates how routine interactions perpetuate gender hierarchies. Even when it was evident that the woman was in charge of the money, the worker's understanding of the circumstance was affected by the idea that men should be providers. bell hooks' analysis of patriarchy further explains this moment. hooks notes that "males as a group have and do benefit the most from patriarchy" (hooks 9). Patriarchal societies frequently link economic authority and decision-making power to men, so reinforcing the notion that men are naturally providers and leaders. The worker's assumption in Adichie's encounter reflects this patriarchal system. The act underscores the profound influence of entrenched societal assumptions regarding male authority on daily perceptions.

Adichie presents another example involving an incident in a restaurant where a waiter persistently greeted the male companion while disregarding Adichie's presence. Despite Adichie being the individual settling the bill, the waiter focused his attention on the man. The experience reflects how gender expectations influence social recognition and visibility. The power of women is frequently disregarded due to cultural traditions that designate men as the main players in social and economic transactions. Judith Butler's notion of performativity offers a valuable interpretive framework. The waiter's behavior exemplifies a recurrent cultural enactment that allocates authority and decision-making power to males. Through several quotidian exchanges of this nature, gender roles become institutionalized and seem inherent.

Adichie examines the reinforcement of gender norms through the socialization of children. She contends that societies instruct boys to repress emotional vulnerability and equate masculinity with control and dominance. She notes that, "we teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability" (Adichie 10). Simultaneously, girls are instructed to restrain their desires and adhere to standards of modesty and compliance. Adichie asserts that "we teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" (Adichie 10). Judith Lorber's claim that humans are "born sexed but not gendered" (Lorber 4) underscores the importance of the socialization process. From childhood, individuals are instructed to enact gender in accordance with cultural expectations. Male children are socialized to exhibit dominance and emotional control, whilst female children are taught to emphasize tolerance and obedience. These early lessons influence adult conduct and perpetuate gender hierarchies across society.

Adichie also examines the societal norms pertaining to marriage and relationships. She observes that women are often assessed based on their marital status, but men are seldom subjected to similar scrutiny. In some societies, an unmarried woman of a particular age may be seen as unsuccessful or unattainable, whereas men are merely seen as persons who have yet to opt for marriage. Adichie notes that women may don wedding rings in professional environments to elicit increased respect from others. Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as the 'Other' provides a significant viewpoint on these expectations. In patriarchal societies,



women are frequently characterized predominantly by their relationships with men. Marriage serves as a societal indicator that validates a woman's identity within the cultural context. In the absence of that relationship, women may be regarded as incomplete or socially aberrant. Adichie's insights demonstrate the persistent impact of these assumptions on modern social views. bell hooks' analysis of patriarchal culture clarifies this phenomenon. hooks contends that patriarchal institutions organize social relationships to perpetuate male supremacy and female subservience. Patriarchal societies perpetuate old gender hierarchies by linking women's social status to marriage, even in circumstances where women have attained economic independence.

Adichie recounts another illuminating encounter involving a hotel security guard who interrogated her presence. The guard presumed that a woman entering a hotel unaccompanied must have morally questionable intentions. Women's autonomy is frequently viewed with Skepticism and ethical scrutiny, while men's involvement in analogous contexts is seldom challenged. Judith Butler's concept of gender control explains this situation. Butler contends that societal norms govern gender behavior by incentivizing compliance and penalizing deviance. An independent woman defies conventional norms of female humility and reliance, thereby attracting notice or suspicion. The guard's response exemplifies the overarching cultural system that aims to uphold conventional gender norms.

Gender hierarchy frequently manifests through commonplace social encounters, influencing perceptions and treatment of individuals, rather than overt discrimination. Through these experiences, Adichie reveals the pervasive influence of gender standards in ostensibly trivial circumstances.

The Illusion of Equality

Despite women's increased access to education, employment, and public life, Adichie says that the ongoing prevalence of daily gender expectations fosters the illusion of equality. Modern societies often commend women's accomplishments while concurrently upholding cultural standards that restrict female independence and power.

Adichie's examples demonstrate how gender preconceptions persistently influence social behavior, even in seemingly progressive situations. The server who overlooked Adichie and spoke to the male companion presumably did not intend to exhibit discrimination towards her. His conduct exemplifies a profoundly embedded cultural narrative that links leadership and financial responsibility to men. These exchanges demonstrate the subtle functioning of gender hierarchy through traditional social customs. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity describes the reasons for the persistence of these tendencies. Gender roles are perpetuated by recurrent social acts, hence continuing to affect behavior even when individuals deliberately support gender equality.

Adichie further underscores that these expectations are detrimental to both women and men. The pressure on men to conform to stringent masculine ideals constrains emotional expression and perpetuates unattainable standards of achievement.

We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a *very* narrow way. Masculinity is a hard, small cage, and we put boys inside this cage. (Adichie 10)

This highlights how gender norms restrict not only women but also men through rigid expectations. bell hooks' analysis of patriarchy underscores its extensive ramifications. Patriarchal systems not only favour men but also impose constrictive roles upon them. hooks



contends that feminism aims to deconstruct these systems to establish more equal and humane social interactions.

Ultimately, Adichie's essay demonstrates that gender injustice frequently endures beneath the facade of contemporary societal advancement. Societal expectations persist in influencing individuals' experiences of gender in daily life. These nuanced forms of inequality foster the misconception that equality has been attained, concealing the persistent impact of patriarchal standards. Adichie encourages readers to acknowledge these concealed dynamics and to reevaluate how gender norms persist in influencing modern society. By revealing the quotidian mechanisms that perpetuate gender hierarchies, *We Should All Be Feminists* contests the notion that gender equality has been fully realized and calls for a more rigorous analysis of the cultural practices that uphold inequality.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* underscores the persistence of gender inequality in daily social practices, despite the belief that contemporary cultures have attained gender equality. Adichie illustrates how cultural expectations continue to influence perceptions of authority, conduct, and social roles through personal anecdotes and lived experiences.

This study employs feminist theories from Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Judith Lorber, and bell hooks to illustrate that gender is a social construct. The examination of occurrences like the class monitor narrative, presuppositions on male financial dominance, and societal expectations related to marriage demonstrates the persistence of minor gender prejudices in daily life. Such instances illustrate the illusion of equality, wherein seeming social advancement conceals the persistent impact of patriarchal norms. Adichie's essay prompts readers to question commonplace assumptions and to acknowledge that attaining authentic gender equality necessitates both social consciousness and cultural transformation.

Further research may investigate Adichie's feminist concepts in her other literary works, *Americanah* and *Purple Hibiscus*, to analyse the dynamics of gender, identity, and power within various narrative frameworks. Subsequent research might examine the worldwide cultural influence of *We Should All Be Feminists*, specifically its contribution to the proliferation of feminist discourse via media venues like TED Talks. Examining the convergence of gender with race, culture, and class in Adichie's oeuvre may yield profound insights into modern feminist discourse.

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