

Raising a New Generation of ‘Feminists’: Gender and Social Norms in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Imitations* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie

Abstract

This paper focuses on the way females are perceived by the society in our contemporary world in selected short stories of the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie in her works portrayed the underestimating social norms that misleadingly specify the gender roles for both males and females in the Nigerian community and the negative consequences the females have to endure in order to keep the intact image desired by such biased societies. Those gender regulations and the role of the social transformational goals will be utilized in unfolding gender problems in the light of Judith Butler’s book *Undoing Gender* in Adichie’s stories *Imitations* and *The Arrangers of Marriage*. Adichie sheds light on the dehumanizing treatment of females in such biased societies and the role of the females themselves in challenging those norms by taking serious steps toward transforming them in a way that serves both genders equally. This study will

highlight Adichie’s objective in building a positive society by raising a new generation of feminists either males or females in the light of her nonfictional work *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014).

Keywords: Feminism; Gender; Social Norms; Butler; Adichie; *Imitations*; *The Arrangers of Marriage*; Social Transformation.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the 20th and the 21st century, there have been a large number of studies and literary works that depict the status of females in different cultures around the globe. Most of the work done by females, either literary or philosophical, discusses how women are being viewed by either the other gender or by the society in general. They mainly concentrate on their rights, and fight against all dehumanizing ways of treatment that females have undergone and are still going through in their societies.

The status of females and their lives have been highlighted by many works. In particular, females who live in colonial and post-colonial areas of the world are the case of study in many works of literature. Recently, there has been more interest in reflecting and shedding light on the situation of the African female by African female writers than what has been done in the past. One of the rising and most iconic female figures in African literature is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie is a Nigerian female fiction and non-fiction writer a novelist and an essayist who has written many literary pieces *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *Americanah* (2013), and a collection of short stories.

In this paper, Adichie’s views on female identity, gender problems and social norms will be discussed through two short stories: “Imitations” and “The Arrangers of Marriage”. It will depict the lives of Nigerian females. This paper discusses the cases of these Nigerian females, and how they suffer due to gender differentiation and social norms. Furthermore, Adichie’s essay *We should all be feminist* (2014) where she expressed her views on what it means to be a feminist in a culture which is governed by problematic gender abuses and discrimination in Nigeria as this essay will be discussed side by side with her short stories.

In addition, the discussion will mainly focus on Judith Butler’s views on gender and norms discussed in her book *Undoing Gender* (2004). This paper will mainly focus on her two chapters: “Gender Regulations” and “Social Transformation.” It is important to note that Adichie’s objective is to create a positive society, where females are treated in a better way, not only in Nigeria, but also in the whole world. By showing the biases of the society’s judgment on females she attempts at educating them about such injustices.

In our modern world, feminist writings aim at changing the negative images and roles that society has fashioned for females. Therefore, it is the duty of the feminist writer to change those views about the females by representing them in their works. In her book, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Toril Moi tracks how feminists aim at changing the image of females as she explains that “women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards on them” (2002, 57). Therefore, creating a literary work that represents females and their suffering is vital towards understanding their needs for recognition and respect in this world.

2. Views on Gender: The Common Ground between Butler and Adichie

Judith Butler is an American thinker and gender theorist whose work has a huge influence on feminism. Some of her works such as *Performative acts and Gender Constitution* (1988), *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Undoing Gender* (2004), and other works focused on gender studies. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler discusses the importance of feminist theory to represent and reflect on the status of women in society. To Butler, feminist studies which focus on the representation of women is vital because it shows how women in this world have been misrepresented. Butler explains that “For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed obviously important considering the pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all” (1990, 4). Due to this reason, many feminists have aimed at constructing a representation of females to ensure that they are fully recognized and looked at in a neutral and natural way. They try to revise all the rules that govern this relationship which has been historically constructed for the favor of one gender ruling or using the other, the female. Most of those literary and non-literary works try to build a bridge to link between sexes and show us what is real and unreal about females. By doing so, the intense relationship between genders, masculine and feminine, will disappear if they succeed in substituting it with new male/female relationship that is neutral and acceptable to both. Therefore, Butler, in *Undoing Gender* (2004), intensifies the importance of fantasy to build such rules because “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise. Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (2004, 217).

One of the most important issues discussed by many feminists is the subjugation of women. Viewing women are subordinate and oppressed has been the norm in many cultures and communities around the world. Butler highlights this idea as a major defect in gender relationship. She explains:

To be called a copy, to be called unreal, is thus one way in which one can be oppressed.

But consider that it is more fundamental than that. For to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject as a possible or potential subject. But to be unreal is something else again. For to be oppressed one must first become intelligible. To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human. It is to find oneself speaking only and always as if one were human, but with the sense that one is not. It is to find that one's language is hollow, and that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in one's favor. (2004, 218)

Gender as a word, according to Butler, is a kind of a law that is connected to our understanding to all the rules and regulations that govern the relationship between sexes. Gender “is an index of the proscribed and prescribed sexual relations by which a subject is socially regulated and produced.” (2004, 48). Therefore, all of our human actions and behaviors are governed by the rules and regulations that surround the word ‘gender.’ It is how each and every culture produces and reproduces it again and again according to its needs and laws. But the problem does not lie in the act of producing these laws, but for the sake of whom it has been produced, and on whom these laws and rules are thrown upon. As it has always been and is still until today, and as expressed by many female writers, they have been negatively affected by these laws. This is due to the fact that many of these laws are male centered or dominated by patriarchal figures. As a result, it is the duty of feminist to reconstruct these laws that govern the word ‘gender.’ To change the views by which we relate to each other as males and females.

Butler's theory on gender goes well with how Chimamanda Adichie reflects on the status of the African Female, precisely the Nigerian. It is vital here to start with Adichie's essay, *We Should All be Feminist* (2014), to pinpoint her objective to change how the society views feminists. Adichie, through her fiction, concentrates on gender behaviors that are dominant in Nigeria, mainly in her Igbo culture and traditions. She demonstrates how Nigerian females are treated and oppressed by a male dominant community, either in Nigeria or abroad. She states that gender as we see it today is a “grave injustice” (2014, 12). Adichie explains that feminism is viewed as “negative” in African culture because females are thought to be “angry” and hateful to men by defending their rights. She implies that the problem of gender is deep rooted within the psyche of the whole society.

Adichie's endeavors to change the negative views towards females and feminists in the Nigerian culture are projected through educating the people about these views in her fiction. When asked about her courage in writing and her ideas on feminism in an interview with the New African Magazine, she said "So, for example, when I talk about feminism in a conservative society like Nigeria, the people's reaction is like: 'Oh, you are upsetting people' or 'God, she's gone too far'... People think that when I say fairly harmless things like, men and women are equal, or that in a marriage, both people are full partners, somehow that is controversial. I find this so ridiculous because this is just common sense in my opinion. Men and women are equal." (Adichie, 2021) Therefore, discussing gender is a primary choice in her fiction. She reflects on images, stereotypes, behaviors, expectations, and other problems related to the Nigerian female in her works. All are directly related to the dilemma of gender. She emphasizes on this issue because of what she calls "the weight of gender expectations" in her culture, and that the "problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are" (2014, 17-18). Fighting against all the negative social norms in one's culture is vital to progress positively and naturally toward a balanced community that respects both males and females. Adichie's mission is best elaborated in Butler's words: "it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories is put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable" (2004, 216).

The question to be asked here is: how does Adichie then define feminism in her quest to project a balanced view towards females and feminists who are calling for their rights in her culture; How does she want to transform all these views that surround and affect their life negatively? Her definition of '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" (2014, 23). She does this by neutralizing our definition of a feminist character in which it belongs to all human beings, both sexes.

3. Defying the Negative 'Social Norms' in Society

It is notable that Adichie tries to question the social norms that govern the lives of many females in her society. These norms are somehow inherited and not judged by reason sometimes because it puts the female in a very weak position, not letting her express herself properly. Therefore, it is Adichie's main mission to show these norms in her fiction, and to call for the rights of what she calls "the female human" (2014, 21). She explains that she is "a human being, but there are particular things that happen to [her] in the world because [she is] a woman" (2014, 22). Certain social norms sometimes govern the psyche of the society, and it survives time without questioning the validity of those norms: are they correct or wrong? Do they serve

purpose of the society in which every individual naturally develops through and by them? In her essay, Adichie mentions some of the negative norms such as when the culture favors boys over girls. They teach a girl to “worry” about her being “likeable” and at the same time not “teaching boys to care about being likeable” (2014, 13). Butler emphasizes on the idea of norms and how it affects our own definition of gender, and anything connected to it.

Butler discusses the relation between gender and norms in her chapter, “Gender Regulations.” She states that “a norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of *normalization* (2004, 41). Therefore, certain behaviors, which we may call norms, are normalized to serve a purpose in our social domain. The problem does not lie in the act of normalizing, but in the norm or the behavior of the society and whether it really serves everybody, males, and females or not. The danger is maybe found in the act of not questioning the norm as it is practiced every day without revising its purposes and objectives; it may only serve a certain gender or group over the other. As Butler puts it, “Norms may or may not be explicit, and when they operate as the normalizing principle in social practice, they usually remain implicit, difficult to read, discernible most clearly and dramatically in the effects that they produce” (2004, 41). The effects of the norms, if negative, will mainly affect the stability and continuity of the whole society. When these norms, which come in form of views or practices, are developed and practiced in the society for a long period of time, they consequently become the normal thing to do. Butler explains that if these norms become normal to us, they will form a kind of blurred view towards our definition of gender, either masculine or feminine:

The norm governs intelligibility, allows for certain kinds of practices and action to become recognizable as such, imposing a grid of legibility on the social and defining the parameters of what will and will not appear within the domain of the social. The question of what it is to be outside the norm poses a paradox for thinking, for if the norm renders the social field intelligible and normalizes that field for us, then being outside the norm is in some sense being defined still in relation to it (2004, 42)

These norms become the source of oppression on whom they are practiced. In other words, the ideas which are held by the whole society about females, and how they should be treated or raised did not yet develop in Adichie’s views. She says that: “a man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, innovative, creative. We have evolved. But our ideas of gender have not evolved very much” (2014, 11). Those ideas, norms or even behaviors related to gender, deny any evolution towards recognizing the rights of females, or even males, in society.

4. Discussion of Adichie’s Short Stories: “Imitations,” and “The Arranger of Marriage”

The discussion of the short stories will mainly concentrate on the norms represented by Adichie. These stories depict the lives of two Nigerian women: Nkem, and Chinaza. Adichie manifests through their routines how their behaviors and psyche have been affected by the negative norms that control their lives as females. Those Nigerian women live abroad in America as some of them came to America to get married and others came as immigrants.

In “Imitations,” the story revolves around the relationship between rich men and their wives who live abroad in America. Nkem is a Nigerian woman who lives in Philadelphia, U.S.A. She is married to a man who is fond of collecting pieces of art, especially Igbo. The main event of the story occurs when Nkem discovers that her husband has a girlfriend back in Lagos, Nigeria. Her husband, Obiora, visits them only two months a year. He spends the remaining ten months of the year back in Nigeria running a business there. She comes to know about his relationship from her friend, Ijemamaka. She tells her that “This is what happens when you marry a rich man” (2009, 19). Her ultimate dream might have been revolving around getting married to a man, a rich one to be more precise. But, as Nkem describes her marriage, she got into “the coveted league, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies league” (2009, 22). She did not realize that her husband has other women in his life, just because he can. Nkem felt used and disrespected due to her husband’s promiscuity that reflects his views as a male who can have multiple relationships regardless of his marriage. He could have a wife abroad in America and a girlfriend back in Nigeria. This norm is apparent in the discussion between Nkem and another Nigerian woman whom she met at a wedding in Delaware. She explains the whole situation: “Our men like to keep us here, she had told Nkem. They visit for business and vacations, they leave us and the children with big houses and cars, they get us housegirls from Nigeria who we don’t have to pay any outrageous American wages, and they say business is better in Nigeria” (2009, 23).

Adichie highlights this norm about married females through these stories of women who suffer from the husband’s extra marital affairs. Adichie illustrates this in her essay “*We should All be Feminist*” about how a culture makes females aspire to get married because being single is disgraceful. Society “teaches a woman at a certain age who is unmarried to see it as a deep personal failure. While a man at a certain age who is unmarried has not quite come around to making his pick” (2014, 16). These norms put females in a red boarder line in which they try to behave according to what society and the norms inform them to do. If a female does not behave accordingly, she will be treated as an outcast by the whole society. Therefore, Nkem is supposed to compensate and deal with this problem in a way that only saves her marriage. This is expressed through the discussion between Nkem and her household girl, Amaeche, about Obiora’s relationship back in Nigeria. Amaeche tells her ““You will forgive him, madam. Men

are like that” (2009, 28). However, at the end of the story Nkem insisted on her husband that she returns to Nigeria and live with him in Lagos as a respected legal wife. By doing so, she has challenged the social norms of being a voiceless female.

In “The Arrangers of Marriage,” it manifests the social norms of controlling to whom women should be married and finding the perfect marriage arrangement for a female. Chinaza is a Nigerian woman who got married to a Nigerian man who lives in America. Her marriage has been arranged by her uncle and her aunt as she should get married and go live with her husband because his mother was worried that he might get married to an American woman. So, her husband, according to her family, was “the perfect husband” for her (2009, 126). After Chinaza arrives to America, she begins to discover annoying facts about her husband. Every time, she blames ‘the arrangers of marriage’ about not telling her about the difficulties she might face in controlled marriage. She keeps saying, “They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage” (2009, 125)

One of the most important issues is the education of females. Chinaza mentioned that she was not given the right to express her opinion because her life was controlled and arranged according to the wishes of her family and society. She says, “I had thanked them both for everything—finding me a husband... It was the only way to avoid being called ungrateful. I did not remind them that I wanted to take the JAMB exam again and try for the university” (2009, 126). Adichie points out here that Society favors marriage for females over education. Females are not allowed to choose what they want in life. These norms that females must be up to in order to satisfy the society’s aspiration, damage their lives. As a consequence, they have to deal with their marriage as the only way to survive this world.

At the end of the story, Chinaza discovers that her husband is married to an American in order to get his green card without even mentioning this to her before marriage. Also, her neighbor, Nia, confesses to her that she and her husband were in a relationship before she got married. Adichie shows us these images of females suffering from their husbands’ relationships. At the same time, they are supposed to live with it in order to save the marriage. Adichie explains how society views marriage: “This is a threat – the destruction of a marriage, the possibility of not having a marriage at all – that in our society is much more likely to be used against a woman than against a man” (2014, 13). In this context of marriage, the husband underestimates his wife and treats her as if he owns her just because he is educated and well off while she isn’t. Furthermore, Adichie shows us these images of women who really want a loving husband, while their husbands were raised by the norms of the society that facilitated them to manipulate and own their wives. When Chinaza wanted to leave her husband, she thought about how her family would make it hard on her. All she wanted was to be respected as wife:

I shook my head. You left your husband? Aunty Ada would shriek. Are you mad? Does one throw away a guinea fowl's egg? Do you know how many women would offer both eyes for a doctor in America? For any husband at all? And Uncle Ike would bellow about my ingratitude, my stupidity, his fist and face tightening, before dropping the phone.

"He should have told you about the marriage, but it wasn't a real marriage, Chinaza," Nia said. "I read a book that says we don't fall in love, we climb up to love. Maybe if you gave it time—"

"It's not about that."

"I know," Nia said with a sigh. "Just trying to be fucking positive here. Was there someone back home?"

"There was once, but he was too young, and he had no money." (2009, 136-37)

In this context, Adichie wants to shed light on norms such as this: how society raises males to disrespect females, how they are raised to see marriage as something to be owned, not shared with respect. As she puts it, "Even the language we use illustrates this. The language of marriage is often a language of ownership, not a language of partnership. We use the word *respect* for something a woman shows a man, but not often for something a man shows a woman" (2014, 16).

5. Conclusion

It is very important that an individual, either female or male, is to be recognized as a human with rights in his society and culture. What Adichie wants us to see through these stories is the dehumanizing treatment of females through negative norms related to gender that were normalized by society by time. These norms affect the way we live and respect each other. She wants us to look forward to the future with better manners and behaviors. Males and females should not be the victims of negative norms, and this is her message to all. She emphasizes that, "And I would like today to ask that we should begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently" (2014, 14).

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