

The Role of Feminine Literacy in a Patriarchal Society: A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions

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Abstract: The renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a response to her friend Ijeawele how to bring up her daughter as a feminist, has brilliantly recommended realistic fifteen suggestions which have been delineated in the form of a letter. The prose-version delves deep into the scenarios and experiences to exhibit the society's stance in regard to feminine consideration. Using a feminist lens, she highlights that feminine literacy is an essential achievement of every woman's mundane existence to cope with crude and embarrassing circumstances and to establish her unique identity against patriarchal conventions. This paper employs the vision of the author to stand by the assertive proposals that a woman's self-assertion and self-actualisation are highly required with a view to preserving one's identity beyond societal limitations and cultural expectations.

Keywords: Feminine Literacy, Patriarchal Society, Feminist Manifesto, Identity, Equality, Self-Actualization.

Introduction:

As is often asserted, *feminism* is a socio-political term that commonly refers to the social political, personal and economic equilibrium of the sexes in the context to the age-old societal pattern where male point of view has been traditionally given prioritisation. As and outcome women are viewed as subordinate to the male part. They are unjustly dealt with in this patriarchal milieu. But with the passage of time the consideration about the women's position in a society has drastically been altered due to extended and up to-dated vision about the world and the nature around. The under privileged and humiliated women come forward and start fighting against gender stereotypes and conventional restriction imposed upon them from the time immemorial. With sufficient upliftment and elaboration of social interpersonal professional and political mixing now the women possess a notion to raise their voices against all odds and misfortunes. And gradual educational engagement of women helps them a lot to realise their equal work in every societal interaction. The noted French Philosopher Charles Fourier is credited with having introduced the word—'*feminisme*' in 1837 which for the first time appeared in 1871 in France in a medicine thesis. The word inspired the French author and playwright called Alexander Dumas Fils (1824-1895) to coin the term *feminism* in his essay in 1872. After that the concept becomes gradually popular in 1872 in the Netherlands, then in 1890s in Great Britain, in 1910s in United States and so on. Then comes numerous feminist movements highlighting their purposes and viewpoints.

Traditionally the mainstream feminism, infixing their roots in 19th century, focuses on obtaining the gender equality within the matrix of liberal democracy

guided by human rights perspective. This *first wave feminism*, the term coined by journalist Martha Lear in a New York Times Magazine in March 1968 in a article entitled— “The Second Feminist Wave: what do these women want?”, deals with achieving political and legal reform espoused by substantive equality to curb systematic discrimination as prevailed in the-then society. Another philosophical very aunt of feminism is to be found in Marxist theory which is equal to *socialist feminism*. These umbrella terms highlight how women are exploited in a capitalist environment and some notable figures like Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Nancy Fraser, Claudia Jones, Lisa Vogel, Camila Vallejo, Silvia Federici, etc expostulate the Marxist analysis by exposing how in a bourgeois society the women are forced to undergo the unpaid sex relations and domestic responsibilities.

Then in the early 1980 comes *the radical feminism* who mainly deals with patriarchy where men are viewed as domineering and women as oppressed and tortured. According to Shulamith Firestone in the book entitled— “*The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*” (1970): “the end goal of feminist revolution must be unlike that of the first feminist movement not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally” (Firestone 11) and on the basis of radical feminism comes *the second wave feminism* that begin in the early 1960 and its essential range of issues include domesticity, family matters, the interactions at the workplaces, sexuality, reproductive rights, *de facto* inequalities and official legal inequalities. It ended with the lesbian sex oil or *feminist sex war* in 1980s and it is replaced in the early 1990 by the *third wave feminism*. This third wave deals with some current notions of feminism like intersectionality, sex positivity or sex radical feminism, vegetarian ecofeminism, trans feminism and post modern feminism. That's it is quite clear that all the waves of feminism engage in reordering the society by didn't of radical views and attempt at reducing the so called patriarchal milieu. In this respect the radical feminist in 20th century Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie comes forward with her highly acclaimed perspectives to eliminate the patriarchy in a societal environment where a female version of a man needs to be brought up with some supposed suggestions given by her with a view to creating a world both for men and women on equal parameters of every exposures and reciprocal actions.

Dear Ijeawele:

Dear Ijeawele was the friend of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who a couple of years ago asked her how to reach her daughter just a baby girl at the time as a feminist in a society where the conventional prejudices about gender roles prevail and a lot of expectations and responsibilities have been stigmatized on the shoulders of a woman. Knowing this Adichie as a response to a email correspondence suggested hours friend 15 brilliant suggestions in a form of a letter. Later she herself posted these fifteen suggestions on her own official Facebook page on 12th October in 2016. Consequently, these suggestions were brought out into a book in 2017. With its publication the book immediately becomes very popular and its manifesto obtains a new landmark in the way to feminism. The strength of the book lies in its giving the readers the author's personal and familiar connections with the manifesto. The book is written in a very simple lucid and direct manner. No vague use of words is seen. The approach is clear. It aims at supplying parents with the societal instrument with which they should teach their wards to campaign against all types

of oddities and gender disparities meted out from operable customs and practices in a society.

Be a Full Person:

Beyond traditional view of society according to Adichie, a man or woman requires his or her own “the confidence and self-fulfilment that come with doing and earning” (Adichie 10) because it helps him or her to rise above mental conflicts which are conventionally nourished by everybody’s individual opinion about what he or she should be or should do, ignoring “what matters is what you want for yourself, and not what others want you to want.” (Adichie 11). Adichie proposes that in a domestic environment husband and wife together deal with parenting and doing household duties hand by hand without creating a debate that tends to view care-giving to babies and domestic responsibilities are singularly female domains. She firmly gives up that conventional notion, rather she believes in gender-neutral position in conjugal life and they happily need to perform dual duties at home and abroad alike.

Do it Together:

Adichie opined that husband and wife in a family equally share the verb ‘doing’. They should not dispute on the basis of socially conditioned sense of duty that women, being the replica of motherhood, is prone to better take care of their child. Keeping aside the sun, she puts emphasis on the word ‘equality’ which is to be explained the “Equally” of course depends on you both, and you will have to work it out, paying equal attention to each person’s needs. It does not have to mean a literal fifty-fifty or a day-by-day score-keeping but you’ll know when the child-care work is equally shared.” (Adichie 13). So according to her, to maintain ‘equality’, mutual dual co-operation and understanding is highly to be observed where is ‘the language of help’ should be rejected. The word ‘helping’ is not desirable to be ascribed against male’s ‘doing’, rather he should start believing in view that child-care is not only mother’s province but of his too, equal primary responsibility. This type of views helps in reducing the gender inequality and male-dominated arrogance. A sophisticated nature starts reigning in both lives.

The Idea of Gender-roles:

Adichie views that ‘gender-roles’ in a society is bogus one, ‘absolute nonsense’. The notable American sociologist and author Helen Merrell Lynd in her book entitled – “*On Shame and the Search for Identity*” (2001) says that it “tends to regard both others and himself as instruments, remaining external to each other. He must always weigh and appraise and be on guard against committing himself. For others, he should seek approval, indulgence, contributions to his pleasure. For others, he should do the right things.” (Lynd 236). It does not have any significant positive role. On contrary, it has created a lot of disparities in outlook towards each other, whereas the women are, for example, viewed as expert in cooking; and in a society ‘cooking’ is regarded as “some kind of marriageability test for women.” (Adichie 16). But Adichie clearly points out that this type of notion is harmful in keeping a balance in gender roles. She strongly says that “The knowledge of cooking does not come pre-installed in a vagina. Cooking is learned. Cooking--domestic work in general— is a life skill that both men and women should ideally have. It is always skill that can elude both men and women.” (Adichie 16). She mentions a fact about her first-hand experience whereabouts one day she bought an outfit for her daughter at a children’s shop. She became surprised at the check out counter where the cashier seemed horrified to know the blue for a girl. He, be-

ing an apt marketing person, cleverly invented that pink-blue binary for girls and boys respectively. It means from the very beginning the gender biasness has been grafted in the brains of boys and girls, whereas actually “The bodies of male and female infants are similar, after all.” (Adichie 17). Thus from home to marketing places to social encounters, different ‘gender roles’ is distributed which needs, according to her, complete eradication. Only this will help in giving young children free spaces to reach their full potential and effective development as a full human being. She notices that “the mothers of baby girls were very restraining, constantly telling the girl ‘don’t touch’ or ‘stop and be nice’, and she noticed that the baby boys were encouraged to explore more and were not restrained as much and were almost never told to ‘be nice’”. Her theory was that parents unconsciously start very early to teach girls how to be, that baby girls are given less room and more rules and baby boys more room and fewer rules.” (Adichie 20). Adichie bears the view that ‘gender roles’ which is socially conditioned in its people, needs to be uprooted altogether so that a healthy and helpful coexistence become a reality.

Feminism Lite:

According to Adichie, *Feminism Lite* refers to the idea of imposed for conditioner female equality which is to her opinion a bankrupt idea. It applies the appeasing analysis like he (the man) is the head and she (the female) is the neck of a family. The term expects the man to behave women well. No doubt this is a hollow idea. On the basis of Feminism Lite, the male possesses the idea of ‘allowing’ women to be mentioned to acknowledge their contribution willingly or unwillingly. The word ‘allow’ is a troubling word that hints power on the part of male side which is not desirable at all if the world is wishing to keep equilibrium in the relationship between man and woman. The different educational institutions should come forward to encourage woman’s studies so that the desired broadness of mentality gets widened to bridge up the gaps in between two halves of same human entity. Gloria Jean Watkins (1952-2021), who is commonly known by her pen name as bell hooks, a renowned American theorist, social critic and author in her book entitled– “*Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000)”, says that “The institutionalization of woman’s studies helped spread the word about feminism. It offered a legitimate site for conversion by providing a sustained body of open minds. Students who attended woman’s studies class were there to learn.” (Hooks 21). But quite contrary to this desire, gender injustice is seen and welcome criticism comes up against women in society which is clearly visible in her writing in the following way:

“But here is a sad truth: our world is full of men and women who do not like powerful women. We have been so conditioned to think of power as male that a powerful woman is an aberration. And so she is policed. We ask of powerful women—is she humble? Does she smile? Is she grateful enough? Does she have a domestic side? Questions we do not ask powerful man, which shows that our discomfort is not with power itself, but with women.” (Adichie 24-5).

Other Suggestions:

Having alluded the most important suggestions, Adichie Ajay fifth suggestion instruct her friend to teach her daughter Chizalum ‘to read and love books’ which helps in extending her views and encouraging her not to accept everything blindly. To this process she learns how ‘to question language’ being the sixth suggestions which allows her to think that “women actually don’t need to be championed and reversed; they just need to be treated as equal human beings” (Adichie 29). Then

C1 her female friend '*not to speak of marriage as an achievement*' before her daughter at anytime to come as a seventh suggestion. The next important suggestion as eighth given by her is to teach her daughter to '*reject likeability*' as "we teach girls to be likeable, to be nice, to be false. And we do not teach boys the same. This is dangerous. Many sexual predators have capitalised on this. Many girls remain silent when abused because they want to be nice. Many girls spend too much time trying to be 'nice' to people who do them harm. Many girls think of the 'feelings' of those who are hurting them. This is the catastrophic consequence of likeability." (Adichie 37). In this regard, she requests every parent to bring up their child to be honest and brave to speak their mind truthfully and make them think that they are not merely like an object to be evaluated on the parameter of like or dislike. Hence, she emphasizes on one's *sense of identity* as hinted by her as ninth suggestion. See assets the importance of homely environment for the children to learn about the significance of giving dignity to every individual irrespective of their diasporic and cultural differences. At the proverb goes, sound mind dwells in sound body, so she highlights that mother should encourage her daughter to take part in different games and sports without imposing any discrimination in choosing the item of the sports. To remain physically fit and active is important "not only because of the obvious health benefits but because it can help with all the body-image insecurities that the world thrusts on girls." (Adichie 41-2). Regarding eleventh suggestion, she says her friend to teach her daughter contemporary culture's '*selective use of biology*' as 'reasons' for social norms, and also proposes to "teach Chizalum that biology is an interesting and fascinating subject, but she should never accept it as justification for any social norm. Because social norms are created by human beings, and there is no social norm that cannot be changed." (Adichie 49). The twelfth suggestion by Adichie is to frankly *discuss about sex* with her daughter without having kept the pretension that "sex is merely a controlled act of reproduction." (Adichie 50). Till date in our so called modern time, the society needs to deal with sex as a beautiful matter. It is not an issue of prohibition. Knowing sexual matter is not a shameful realization but to apply it wrongly is a matter of disgrace. According to Adichie, children from the beginning requires to be acquainted with sexual organs by their exact biological names like breast, vagina and penis. The more the elders try to hold back them in seclusion, the more untoward and murky thinking entangles the offspring resulting in involving them into ugly sexual traps. Any sexual taboo is to be obliterated altogether to make a society healthy. Besides, men and women should learn to respect each other. The author Alex Comfort in his book entitled- "*The Joy of Sex*" (2003) says that "In talking about sexual relations, it seems right to apply it to any relationship in which there is mutual tenderness, respect and consideration-- from a total interdependence." (Comfort 20). The environment should be friendly enough where no woman should feel ashamed of saying about her periods, because, according to Adichie, "Periods are normal and natural, and the human species would not be here if periods did not exist." (Adichie 53). Overall, male-dominated vision towards woman in a patriarchal milieu needs to be changed drastically because according to Kate Millett in her book entitled- "*Sexual Politics*" (2000), "The effect of patriarchal social conditions with regard to their sexual lives has had enormous and even anomalous results... For the great mass of women throughout history have been confined to the cultural level of animal life in providing the male with sexual outlet and exercising the animal functions of reproduction and care of

the young. Thus the female has had sexuality visited upon her as a punishment in a way of life which, with few exceptions, and apart from maternity, did not encourage her to derive pleasure in sexuality and limited her to an existence otherwise comprised mainly of menial labour and domestic service.” (Millett 119). In this context, Adichie refers to *romance* which will occur in a healthy relationship and for that man and woman equally require waiting which bears the fruit of love through mutual comprehension, faithfulness and genuine selfless feelings towards each other. As a fourteenth suggestion, she reminds the most valuable vision that “not all women are feminist and not all man are misogynists” (Adichie 59), and as a last suggestion she appeals her friend to teach her daughter *about difference* one confronts with another man which is normal in every individual’s personality. Each person has dual explorations, i.e., social and personal identity. These two features receive different opinions from different interactions. It depends on critic’s own sense of judging that individual. It may vary from one person to another. About this variation and cause of that variation, the social critic and author Derek Layder in his book entitled- “*Social and Personal Identity: Understanding Your Self*” (2004) brilliantly says that in the time of considering one’s social and personal identity, “It reveals how your moods and general mental well-being are dependent on the balance of your emotionally-based needs and desires, as well as your ability to enlist others’ empathy, care and support. It provides a clear understanding of the dynamics of personal and social identity and the manner in which they are shaped by the social world. It also offers a view of personal identity as emotionally saturated and intimately linked with personal experience and social relationships.” (Layder 6). So to survive in this diversified world, man and woman equally have to realise that everyone is unique in its own way and no one should try to universalize anything on the basis of his or her own level of thinking and standards of cultural creeds.

Conclusion:

Thus, throughout the suggestions apparently intended to the daughter of her friend to make her feminist, Adichie denotes the fact that the highlighted manifestoes aim at spreading gender equality. The concerned issues barrow down into the core of the matter to such extent that the real roots of gender inequality have been showed to us realistically and she expects the world to drive away those age-afflicted misconceptions and cultural dogmas to be renewed or modified with a clear vision of having spread the balanced norms equally applicable to every man and woman where they “demand the whole lot for women, everything any woman could want anywhere: full equality and opportunity for selfhood and education, sexual freedom and domestic work, their own surnames.” (Hadley 2017). The role of gender cannot be overlooked in a societal scenarios. But in a society, a woman's life is woven into a texture which is coloured with some particular cultural basis that creates a lot of unhappy circumstances for the women in general. Adichie in her another shot book entitled— “*We Should All Be Feminists*” writes that “the problem with gender is that it prescribes how we *should* be rather than recognising 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 34). But till date the conflicts between men and women regarding every field of achievements go on. The pathetic and tormented situation of the women in our society exhibits that society is still lacking educated approach and polished mentality to view women as human being beside male version. The strug-

gle between man and woman moves on regarding the question of settled rights and equal consciousness. Undoubtedly, “There is a naked exteriority in this feminism struggle insofar as there is no separation between class-consciousness and gender-consciousness.”, as opined rightfully by the author and social critic Neeru Tandon in his book entitled— “*Feminism: A Paradigm Shift*” (2008).

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