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## **“Fierce consumers of life”**

Feminism in the Works  
of Chimamanda Adichie

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## INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, perhaps the most famous representative of Nigeria's third generation of writers, is the author of three novels, a collection of short stories, and two essays. Her literary achievements include a number of awards, such as the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005 for her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, and the Bailey's Women's Prize (formerly the Orange Prize for Fiction) in 2015 for her second novel, *Half of A Yellow Sun*. She is read worldwide, with her works translated into over thirty languages. Adichie's notoriety, however, is not limited to her published works: as a matter of fact, she is the author and star of two extremely successful speeches on the TED platform and website, the first of which, 2009's *The Danger of A Single Story*, is ranked among the site's top ten most-viewed videos of all time<sup>1</sup>. Both *The Danger of A Single Story* and her 2013 speech, *We Should All Be Feminists*, are generally considered viral videos, their reach spreading far beyond the breadth of the TED website, YouTube, and a variety of other online platforms and forums. The impact of these speeches on popular culture may also be seen in the choice made by American pop star Beyoncé to sample *We Should All Be Feminists* in her \*\*\**Flawless* music video.

As may be gathered from the title of her 2013 speech, Adichie is a self-defined feminist and a vocal activist, both in the media and in real life events, as testified by her participation in the 2017 Women's March on Washington. She has published articles on *The New Yorker*, has been featured four times on the fashion magazine *Vogue UK*, and appears in various filmed interviews and conventions, easily accessible online. She was even chosen as the new testimonial for the *Boots No7* line of cosmetics, a decision which boosted her visibility to the point of her coming to claim that she "wasn't quite aware of how many pictures of me would be out there. It makes me feel a little vulnerable."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Adichie's fame has spread to the point of her being heralded as "an international celebrat[y]"<sup>3</sup> by many and, likewise, her notoriety has given renewed attention to feminist consciousness and effort today.

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1 Clare Garner. "About the Author," *Purple Hibiscus* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), 310.

2 Valeriya Safronova. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Talks Beauty, Femininity and Feminism," *New York Times*, November 28, 2016, accessed February 12, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/fashion/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-boots-no7-makeup.html?r=0>>

3 Lindsey Green-Simms. "The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Research in African Literatures* 47, no. 2 (2016):143.

The purpose of this text is to examine the dual figure of Adichie as an author and a vocal 'celebrity', within the framework of a feminist perspective. As a matter of fact, the present text aims to contextualize Adichie's definition of feminism from two main perspectives. The first refers to the concept of the 'wave' metaphor in regards to feminist history and places Adichie within the breadth of what is being hotly debated as feminism's fourth wave. The second perspective is concerned with the contents and the political aims of Adichie's feminism and identifies her ideas as akin to intersectionality. This term was coined by UCLA and Columbia law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s to define how an individual is characterized by multiple identities (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and, therefore, how multiple axes of discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) are enacted simultaneously, leading to an urgent need for a feminist movement inclusive of multiple issues<sup>4</sup>.

On a further note, while the concept of the fourth wave and intersectional feminism may be related to Adichie, a third perspective is needed when examining her work, i.e. that of postcolonialism. Indeed, whether she faces the topic of *diaspora* in the USA or the UK or of mimic culture in post-Independence Nigeria or of the destabilized politics of her country inherited with the fall of British colonial rule, Adichie's works are laden with the burden of history and its consequences. She does not shy away from 'writing back' to the predominantly white literary canon. To this end, her own words in her 2009 TEDTalk *The Danger of A Single Story* emphasize literature's power to reshape psychological reality and the need for authentic representation in literature, especially for readers from the ex-colonies:

So I was an early reader and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer and when I began to write at the age of seven [...] I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading. [...] What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.<sup>5</sup>

- 4 Crenshaw states: "It's important to clarify that the term was used to capture the applicability of black feminism to anti-discrimination law. [...] You've got to show that the kind of discrimination people have conceptualized is limited because they stop their thinking when the discrimination encounters another kind of discrimination [...] I wanted to come up with a common everyday metaphor that people could use to say: "it's well and good for me to understand the kind of discriminations that occur along this avenue, along this axis - but what happens when it flows into another axis, another avenue?" Kimberlé Crenshaw, as quoted by Bin Adewunmi. "Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality: 'I wanted to come up with an everyday metaphor that anyone could use'," *New Statesman*, April 2, 2014, accessed February 10, 2017, <<http://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could>>
- 5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," YouTube video, 19:16, posted by TED, October 7, 2009, 0:34 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?>

The importance of analyzing Adichie's works from multiple perspectives is evident in her claims that one cannot reduce a people or a concept to a single story without the incipient risk of breeding stereotype and discrimination<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, while working mainly from a feminist perspective, this text argues that Adichie's works are peopled with characters, and especially women, whom she defines as "fierce consumers of life": complex, contradictory, and ambiguous characters who often carry multiple identities and face multiple issues. In her own words:

I was also determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as the *grittiness* of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life.<sup>7</sup>

Adichie refuses to give 'a single story' of women in her works and, thus, her works will be examined from an inclusive and intersectional point of view.

In order to introduce the concepts that will be later examined in further depth, the text will begin with a brief presentation of Adichie, her life, her cultural background, and, most importantly, her approach to feminism. Afterward, the text will be divided into two main sections, the first concerning feminism and the second with regards to postcolonialism. The first of these sections shall be divided into a first portion which will provide a brief summary of the history of the women's movement and of the wave metaphor, so as to introduce the chronological framework of the fourth wave and how Adichie may be connected to it. The second half will be concerned with intersectionality and African feminisms, so as to examine Adichie's stance on the theoretical framework of academic feminism. The second section will concern postcolonialism and how it ultimately informs Adichie's writing and feminist engagement.

After having provided the analytical framework required to examine Adichie's writing, an individual analysis of her works will be conducted, so as to pinpoint how multiple perspectives are needed in order to examine the most salient issues contained in her works. The texts will be taken into consideration in chronological order, following the year of publication, starting with *Purple Hibiscus* and continuing with *Half of A Yellow Sun*, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and, finally, *Americanah*. Such an analysis aims to highlight recurring themes as well as providing a general sense of the

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6 In Adichie's words: "The problem with stereotypes, however, particularly in literature, is that one story can become the only story: stereotypes straitjacket our ability to think in complex ways." Adichie. "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience," *Transition*, no. 99 (2008): 43.

7 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience," 50-51.

contents of Adichie's feminist ideology.

Finally, an ending section will explore Adichie's public persona, her media and online presence and impact. Two examples may be her being called to provide insight on pressing political issues by both the US and Nigeria, e.g. her short story published on *The New York Times* about the 2016 US presidential election, "*The Arrangements*": *A Work of Fiction*, and her article on the Nigerian paper *The Scoop* in regards to the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2006, *Why can't he just be like everyone else?*.

## 1. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### 1.1 Her Life, Her Work

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in the city of Enugu in 1977 and raised in Nsukka, in what was once the house of fellow Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. She is the daughter of Nigeria's first professor of statistics and of the country's first female registrar in the same university<sup>1</sup>. Nsukka itself is a university town in southeastern Nigeria, more precisely in Enugu State and within the confines of a larger area known as Igboland, i.e. the portion of land between the Bight of Biafra in the South and the Niger River in the West. Igboland has been the indigenous homeland of the Igbo ethnic group, one of the largest three in Nigeria, since long before the borders of what is today known as Nigeria were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Adichie herself is a member of the Igbo people and locates her ancestral hometown in Abba, in Anambra State. Both Abba and Nsukka feature prominently as settings in her works, especially Nsukka, which appears in all three novels and in a number of short stories.

Adichie grew up in the kind of "conventional, middle-class"<sup>2</sup> environment which she often chooses as a perspective for the characters in her works and of which she denounces a dearth in literary and media representation when facing the topic of lifestyles on the African continent. In her 2009 speech on the dangers of stereotypical representation, she claims that:

If I had not grown up in Nigeria and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful

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1 Her parents are Grace Ifeoma and James Nwoye Adichie, who later went on to become Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Nsukka University. Daria Tunca. "Biography," *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*, accessed March 10, 2017, <<http://www.cerep.ulg.ac.be/adichie/cnabio.html>>

2 "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 2:59.

animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, she describes her childhood as happy, the fifth of six children within a close-knit family. As is the staple for the middle-class in Nigeria, they had live-in domestic help, a young boy named Fide, who was partly the inspiration for the character of Ugwu in *Half of A Yellow Sun*.<sup>4</sup> Regardless, the shadow of the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967-1970) and its hardships still loomed over the family. Adichie was born seven years after the end of the conflict and, although she describes her childhood knowledge of the war as vague, she recalls both her grandfathers dying and her parents losing all they owned. Her paternal grandfather died in Biafra<sup>1</sup> and, as her father resided in Biafra<sup>2</sup> during the war (divided from its other half by an occupied road), he could not be reached for burial and was thus destined to an unmarked grave. At the same time, Adichie's maternal grandfather passed away in a refugee camp in Uke, a village in Anambra State. Adichie, therefore, speaks of her relation to the war as "not mere history [...], it is also memory, for I grew up in the shadow of Biafra".<sup>5</sup> Indeed, her impassioned interest in the Nigeria-Biafra war is such that she claims to have known from early on that it would be a subject of which she would write and, ultimately, this project would reach its culmination in the publication in 2006 of a work consumed by the theme of life during the war, *Half of A Yellow Sun*, her second novel.

An early reader, she began consuming children's literature at age four, with a particular propensity for the works of Enid Blyton. Adichie also claims to have begun writing more or less at the same time she began reading, "stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that [her] poor mother was obligated to read"<sup>6</sup>. As mentioned in the introduction, these early readings were comprised almost entirely of British and American books, with the unintended effect of creating in her the dangerous belief that the only worthy subjects of literature were white people. This belief, rooted due to a lack of normalized, humane representation of people of color, subsequently bled into the stories she was herself producing as a child:

I thought that all books had to have white people in them, by their very nature, and so

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3 "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 6:04.

4 "Adichie tells me that Ugwu was inspired in part by Mellitus, a houseboy who served her parents during the war, and Fide, another houseboy who lived with them while she was growing up." Smriti Daniel. "Chimamanda: Tougher than she looks!" *Sunday Times*, January 30, 2011, accessed March 3, 2017. <[http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110130/Plus/plus\\_01.html](http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110130/Plus/plus_01.html)>

5 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 50.

6 "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 0:45.

when I started to write, as soon as I was old enough to spell, I wrote the kinds of stories I was reading.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Adichie began to question her received notion of literature, as a young child still, when she encountered the works of African authors such as Camara Laye and Chinua Achebe. In particular, she describes the experience of reading Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as "a glorious shock of discovery".<sup>8</sup> The novel opened her mind to the possibility that people like her, "girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails"<sup>9</sup>, could be worthy of literature as well. Despite a certain impossibility in completely identifying with Achebe's characters, who still retained a patina of exoticism because of their belonging to a much earlier era, her debt to Achebe is such that she identifies his work as the catalyst in giving her "permission to write [her] own stories"<sup>10</sup>. As a matter of fact, the opening words of Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, contain none other than an homage to *Things Fall Apart*:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, in regards to formal education, Adichie first attended the university primary and secondary schools in Nsukka. She was a proficient student and recounts how, that being the case, students are often expected to pursue medicine or hard sciences in university. As such, she enrolled to study medicine at the University of Nigeria, only to come to the realization within one year that she would have made "a very unhappy doctor"<sup>12</sup> and consequently quitting. At age nineteen, Adichie relocated to the United States to study communication first at Drexel University in Philadelphia and then pursuing a degree in communication and political science at Eastern Connecticut State University, where she graduated *summa cum laude* in 2001. Finally, she completed a master's degree in creative writing at John Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Adichie defines her encounter with the United States as the first time she consciously identified as both African and black, which she claims to have initially resisted because of her strong sense of being Igbo and Nigerian. In her own words:

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7 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 42.

8 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience."

9 "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 2:25.

10 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 42.

11 Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 3. Henceforth all quotes from the text will be referred to as *PH* in parenthesis, in the text, and followed by page numbers.

12 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 42.

"I hadn't thought of myself as black in Nigeria because I didn't need to [...] blackness was the norm, blackness wasn't weighed down with any kind of meaning, it just was".<sup>13</sup>

Race, she states, is not an element of social discrimination in Nigeria the same way ethnicity or religion might be, therefore, she grew up with a clear notion of being Igbo and Catholic Christian, but never black. However, upon discovering how deeply the dynamics of racial identity differed in American society, where blackness is too often weighed down by negative connotations, she remarks that "the thing that's interesting about America is that it thrusts identity onto you, you don't actually have a choice" (3:14). America was ultimately also the place where she then decided to accept blackness as an identity and study it and African-American history, leading to a sense of kinship with the African-American community, albeit not of total identification. "There is also a blackness you have to make a choice to take on and I have made the choice to take it on" (5:25), she states.

In a similar sense, her becoming African was also thrust upon her because of the flattened narrative Western society has of the African continent. The experiences Adichie has relayed in this respect range from the surprise of her American college roommates on her not adhering to what they had expected an 'African' to be, i.e. poor, unused to Western culture and media, a non-fluent speaker of English, to her being expected to intervene on topics concerning African countries she had little to no knowledge of, her opinion being sought out only on the basis of her being African. Her American experience, thus, exposed her not only to race, but also to the misinformation and mystification, to what is ultimately the single story the West holds of Africa (to the point of it even being misidentified as a country and not a continent).

As far as her literary career is concerned, on the other hand, Adichie had already been published in Nigeria before relocating to the United States. Her first works appeared in 1997 and 1998 and consisted of, respectively, a collection of poems entitled *Decisions* and the play *For Love of Biafra*. During her last year at Eastern Connecticut State University, she began to work on her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which would subsequently be published in 2003, earning her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2005, as previously noted. In 2006 her second novel, *Half of A Yellow Sun*, appeared, accompanied by a blurb penned by Chinua Achebe, who wrote thus:

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13 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria," YouTube video, 1:15:38, posted by Atria Kennisinstituut, October 15, 2016, 2:45, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBZdDq0gq-w&list=WL&index=9>>

We do not usually associate wisdom with beginners, but here is a new writer endowed with the gift of ancient storytellers. Adichie knows what is at stake, and what to do about it... She is fearless or she would not have taken on the intimidating horror of Nigeria's civil war. Adichie came almost fully made.<sup>14</sup>

*Half of A Yellow Sun* was subsequently adapted into a film of the same title in 2013 and awarded the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2015.

In 2009, her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, was published and, additionally, Adichie began to be widely known beyond her literary pursuits, as well. In fact, it was the year her TEDTalk *The Danger of A Single Story* appeared. The video was uploaded on YouTube on October 7 2009 and counts 2,655,277 views<sup>15</sup>, as well as 11,887,536 total views on the TED website as of March 14 2017<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, in 2013 she published her third novel, *Americanah*, and authored another popular speech on the TEDxEuston platform (an independently organized TED event centered on Africa) that ultimately became viral, *We Should All Be Feminists*. Public demand was such that it was published as an essay of the same name the following year. The video itself, originally uploaded on YouTube on April 12, 2013, now counts 3,769,056 views as of March 14 2017.<sup>17</sup> In 2015 she was awarded an honorary doctorate at Eastern Connecticut State University and a year later she received the Barnard Medal of Distinction, as well as a second honorary doctorate at John Hopkins University.

Adichie now divides her time between Connecticut and Lagos. She writes for both American and Nigerian news outlets, for example *The New Yorker* and *Premium Times Nigeria*, and teaches a Writers' Workshop in Lagos annually. Her most recent work, *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, was published in March 2017.

## ***1.2 Encountering Feminism***

In regards to her commitment as a feminist, her speech and essay *We Should All Be Feminists* is particularly interesting to the purpose of this text, as it contains a detailed recollection of the author's first approach to feminism. Not unlike her childhood experience with the exclusionary nature of Western literature and its single

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14 Chinua Achebe. "Reviews", *Half of A Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 345.

15 "The danger of a single story | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie"

16 Adichie. "The danger of a single story", *TED* video, 18:49, July 2009, <[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)>

17 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston," YouTube video, 30:15, posted by TEDx Talks, April 12, 2013, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU\\_qWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hg3umXU_qWc)>

representation of Africa as a place of negatives, her first contact with themes of gender and gender discrimination came very early. However, unlike her experience with literature, where she accepted its limited scope of representation as the norm, her early experience of sexism was met with doubt and dissatisfaction. It is recounted in *We Should All Be Feminists*, an episode during her time in primary school in Nsukka, where the pupil with top grades would be chosen to be class monitor for the rest of the class. Adichie recalls being enthusiastic at the prospect as an ambitious young girl, but not being chosen, despite having scored the highest marks, on the sole basis of her gender:

[...] it was an exciting prospect for the nine year-old me. I very much wanted to be the class monitor and I got the highest score in the test. Then, to my surprise, the teacher said the monitor had to be a boy, she had forgotten to make that clear earlier because she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second highest score on the test and he would be monitor. [...] the boy was a sweet, gentle soul, who had no interest in patrolling the class with a cane, while I was full of ambition to do so. But I was female and he was male and so he became the class monitor. And I've never forgotten that incident.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, Adichie's encounter with the term 'feminist' is also recollected in the speech and placed during her adolescence, when, in the midst of an argument with a close male friend, he deemed her a 'feminist' and did so with clear disdain for the concept. Despite her friend's words being meant as a slight, the exchange ultimately led her to seek out feminism and become more versed in its arsenal of content. However, the negative connotations that the term 'feminist' still carries became obvious to Adichie through a series of incidents that allowed her to gradually construct her own idea of feminism. For example, in *We Should All Be Feminists* she remarks how, after the publication of *Purple Hibiscus*, she was warned by a well-meaning journalist against the incipient danger of social alienation she would come up against in identifying as feminist. She was informed of, in a sense, the single story of feminism that media and society often still abide by, i.e. that of the angry man-hater or the sad woman who cannot find a partner. Nevertheless, the often negative expectations that accompany feminism cannot be exhausted in a single stereotype. On her path towards confident self-definition as a feminist, Adichie, therefore, explored, often ironically, the idea of assuming different feminist identities, all in reaction to the heavily negative stereotyping of feminists. As such, she states:

At some point I was a happy, African feminist, who does not hate men and who likes lipgloss and who wears high heels for herself, but not for men. [...] that word 'feminist'

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18 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston", 4:37.

is so heavy with baggage, negative baggage.<sup>19</sup>

Adichie's reaction to the idea, shared by a number of academics, including Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, that feminism is essentially a Western concept that cannot be applicable to the African experience will be explored in a later chapter. However, when examining her general approach to feminism, it is interesting to note how she responds to the stereotype of feminists as unfeminine or to the concept of femininity as essentially unfeminist. While allowing that society places excessive importance on women's looks and that "beauty doesn't solve anybody's problem"<sup>20</sup>, Adichie does not reject traditional femininity in itself. Her claim is the following:

When it comes to appearance, we start off with men as the standard, as the norm.[A woman] has to worry about looking too feminine and what it says and whether or not she will be taken seriously. [...] I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity.<sup>21</sup>

In this respect, her position may be considered akin to that of cultural feminism, i.e. that branch of feminism that denounced the devaluation made of traditionally feminine pursuits, including the beauty and fashion industries, as frivolous and, instead, defended their worth. Additionally, Adichie openly declares her honest interest in women's magazines in an anthropological light, not as shallow, frivolous material, but rather as a slice of what a given society at a given time defines beautiful or desirable and the consequent onus it places on women to adhere to that often narrow standard.<sup>22</sup> Adichie's interest in traditionally feminine pursuits not only as worthy, but often indicative of the exclusionary nature of beauty as a social construct will be explored in further depth when analyzing her novel *Americanah*, where the African hair salon (and black hair in general) becomes a sort of *locus* of female social anthropology.

In the following chapter, a brief history of feminism and the wave metaphor will be provided, in order to expose the framework necessary to examine Adichie's work and engagement as an expression of a possible fourth wave of feminism. Moreover, her particular view and conception of feminism will be examined alongside and in relation

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19 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston", 3:38.

20 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems," YouTube video, 15:11, posted by Louisiana Channel, June 26, 2014, 0:58, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7UITxHbMdfs&list=WL&index=1&t=26s>>

21 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie | TEDxEuston", 22:51.

22 In a Louisiana Channel interview, she states: "[...] my basis for this would be women's magazines, which people might be dismissive of, but I think matter, and also advertising, just general mainstream advertising. So, the mainstream idea of beauty in Nigeria, in the US, in Europe. For example, for women, a certain kind of hair: so, hair that grows up [...] it's not portrayed as aspirational." "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 5:43.

to intersectional and African feminisms.

## 2. FEMINISM AND FEMINISMS

### *2.1 Women in Waves*

When examining feminism from a diachronic perspective, the most widespread way to articulate its history appears to be through the use of the 'wave' metaphor. Indeed, feminism is generally expressed as a sequence of waves throughout history. The expression was coined during the 1960s Women's Liberation movement, which then identified as feminism's second wave, in order to set itself not as a first instance or historical anomaly, but rather as a new expression of an ongoing tradition of gender activism, starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As of today, four separate waves of feminism may be counted, although the existence of a fourth wave (and, in certain circles, even of the third) is still being hotly disputed.

The matter of how a fourth wave of feminism may be outlined, however, requires first and foremost a brief overview of gender activism's previous history. Traditionally, feminism's first wave has been made to coincide with North American and European women's movements for the suffrage, between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>. While for the majority of Western countries female suffrage was a hard-won achievement that took half a century to be gained, the fight for the vote arose over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of a wider series of movements and campaigns aimed at improving (mostly married, middle-to-higher-class) women's lot in life. Objectives included wider access to education and employment for women and the improvement of married women's legal status, especially in regards to child custody and divorce. The fight for the vote gradually emerged amongst these concerns as a movement of its own right and the decades between the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> witnessed a flourishing of organizations and movements for the vote, such as 1903's Women's Social and Political Union, founded by the Pankhurst family in Britain. Figures like Susan B. Anthony and Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst are heralded to this day as heroines of the first wave and the term 'suffragette' has gone from a derogatory way of describing female suffragists and campaigners to representative of an era. Indeed, suffragettes became known for their fierce protesting and their knack for

propaganda (particularly through the use of photography, then a new instrument). Suffragettes were unafraid of going to extremes, occasionally resorting to arson or acts of violence, to draw attention to their cause. As early as 1908 imprisoned activists were embarking on hunger strikes, with many seeing themselves and others as martyrs for the cause. The most extreme and perhaps best known example of suffragette protest, however, happened on Derby Day in 1913 when Emily Wilding Davison rushed on the track and was trampled by the King's horse, subsequently dying of her injuries.

Suffragist activism was officially suspended with the onset of the First World War, but the war itself called for a greater influx of women into the workforce, thereby forcing legislators' hand in their favor by the end of the conflict. While countries like New Zealand and Australia had passed laws granting women the right to vote as early as 1893 and 1902 respectively, a majority of Western countries enfranchised (white) women only after the end of the conflict: women over thirty could vote in the UK from 1918 and white women won the national vote in the US in 1919, the same year as the Netherlands, while Denmark had already enfranchised women in 1915. Conditions were not identical across the board, however, with countries like Italy and France granting women the vote only much later, in 1946 and 1944 respectively. Moreover, countries who were under colonial rule had yet a different fate, as equal voting rights would often be tied to the material independence of the country itself. In the interest of the topic of the present text, for example, female suffrage was granted in two separate instances in Nigeria: as early as 1958, two years prior to gaining independence from Britain, women could vote in the South of the country, in 1978 the vote was extended to the North as well.

On a further note, while the use of the term 'feminism' is still widely contested by multiple representatives of women's movements across the African continent, it is nevertheless fundamental to state that female activism was present in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as well, if not even earlier. To this end, early 20<sup>th</sup> century movements such as the Bantu Women's League in South Africa and the Egyptian Feminist Union must be remembered. The Bantu Women's League, the first women's rights organization in South Africa, was founded in 1918 by Dr Charlotte Maxeke to address the laws that required black women to carry passes.<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian Feminist Union, on the other hand, was founded by Huda Sha'rawi in 1923 with the purpose of making the following

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1 "History of Women's Struggle in South Africa," *South African History Online*, accessed June 1, 2017, <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/bantu-womens-league>>

requests:

Political rights for women, changes in the personal status law (especially for controls on divorce and polygamy), equal secondary school and university education, and expanded professional opportunities for women. Its activism was characterized by dynamic interaction and tensions between women's feminism and nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, a figure such as Adelaide Casely-Hayford was instrumental in shaping 20<sup>th</sup> century Sierra Leonian women's movements. Hayford, née Smith in 1868, spent the first twenty-five years of her life away from Africa, returning to Freetown, in Sierra Leone, only after her father's death in 1897. Deeply interested in cultural nationalism and women's rights, Hayford entered the Ladies' Division of the Freetown branch of Marcus Garvey's International Negro Improvement Association and became its president in 1920. In 1923 she founded the Girls' Vocational School in Freetown, one of the first African-run schools in the country,<sup>3</sup> motivated by her realization of the need to improve female education in Sierra Leone:

From her own difficulties in supporting herself and her daughter, Hayford saw the need for a technical training school to train girls who had completed their education, in a trade or livelihood. Mrs. Hayford understood the feminist precept that a woman must be economically independent to retain her self-respect. At the same time she sought to teach domestic science to prepare the girls for the responsibilities of being wives and mothers. The original idea behind the school was to improve the opportunities for women's education in Africa. Hayford sought to help the girls to catch up to the men, for she judged that they were fifty years behind them.<sup>4</sup>

Also of relevance is how women's movements and activism in many African countries, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the independence from colonial regimes, intertwined with nationalist movements. Examples directly taken from the Nigerian experience include the Aba Women's Riots (also known as the Women's War) in 1929 and the Abeokuta Women's Revolt in 1946, which both protested unfair legislation in the colonial regime that specifically targeted women and which will be examined in greater detail in a section wholly dedicated to African feminisms. Likewise, South African anti-apartheid and women's rights activist Lilian Ngoyi led a massive Women's March<sup>5</sup> through the streets of Pretoria in 1956 to protest against the apartheid government's requirement that

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2 Nadjé S. Al-Ali. *Women's Movements in the Middle East: Case Studies of Egypt and Turkey* (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2002), 6.

3 "As one of the first African-owned and African-run schools in Freetown, it paved the way for many more African schools. It introduced the systematic teaching of African arts and crafts." Rina Okonkwo. "Adelaide Casely Hayford, Cultural Nationalist and Feminist," *Phylon* (1960-) 42, no. 1 (1981): 45.

4 Okonkwo, "Adelaide Casely Hayford," 42.

5 "Estimates of the number of women delegates ranged from 10 000 to 20 000, with FSAW [Federation of South African Women] claiming that it was the biggest demonstration yet held." "History of Women's Struggle in South Africa."

black women carry passes.

Meanwhile, the first 'wave' to define itself as such, oddly enough, was feminism's second wave, which began to lay its groundwork after the Second World War in several countries and reached its peak and maximum activity between the 1960s and 1970s, even beyond the framework of a solely Western perspective. Second wave feminism comprises liberal and radical feminism in terms of political aims and methods, as well as movements such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) or Women's Liberation (both chiefly within the US context). While liberal feminism, which organizations such as NOW are often associated with, is traditionally identified with creating an equal distribution of rights and power between men and women, radical feminism, which, instead, emerged from Women's Liberation, questioned the nature of power structures themselves, calling for a much deeper shift in societal relations. As stated by Alice Wolfson, activist and co-founder of the National Women's Health Network:

"Unlike NOW we didn't want a piece of the pie, we wanted to change the pie. We were talking about changing the whole paradigm of the way men and women interact."<sup>6</sup>

While NOW mostly comprised married, middle-class women, i.e. the target audience of Betty Friedan's groundbreaking and best-selling *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), the Women's Liberation movement united often younger women who had conflated together from the Civil Rights Movement, the New Left and the student movements of the 1960s.

The main issues this new generation of feminists was facing included the wage gap between men and women (women had steadily been entering the workforce as a result of the Second World War) and women's right to agency and determination over their own bodies, with issues such as abortion and access to contraception being brought to the foreground. In this respect, not only were mass demonstrations held, such as the 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant (which called against the dehumanizing focus on women's appearance and granted the movement high visibility), but there was also an outpour of seminal texts on women's rights being published. For example, 1970 alone saw the foundation of *Ms.* magazine by Gloria Steinem and the publication of titles such as Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*,

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<sup>6</sup> Alice Wolfson. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, directed by Mary Dore (New York: International Film Circuit, 2014), 23:48.

Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, and Sheila Rowbotham's *Liberation and the New Politics*. Aside from mass protest, two of the core aspects of second wave feminism were grassroots movements, which were created as local chapters and often conflated into larger organizations, and the concept of consciousness-raising as a key tool devised to share personal experiences and explore their political implications in a larger context.

However, second wave feminism was not immune to internal criticism for being overly focused on the oppression of white, heterosexual, middle-class women and, as such, not only did many women of color (including author Alice Walker, who coined the term 'womanism') reject the term 'feminism', but a number of organizations such as Black Sisters United and the female caucus of the Young Lords Party were also founded. The central demands of activists of color were that it be recognized that not all women's needs were identical according to their racial or social background. For example, in terms of reproductive justice (as it was named within the Young Lords Party<sup>7</sup>), in the US, while white women were fighting for the right to undergo safe and legal abortions, not only were black women being pressured by the Black Rights Movement to procreate for their cause<sup>8</sup>, but women of color were also often undergoing forced sterilization as a means of population control<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, lesbian feminists were feeling sidelined by both the gay rights and women's movements, going so far as being famously defined "the Lavender Menace" by Betty Friedan<sup>10</sup>, an expression which would then be reappropriated by lesbian groups themselves. Collectives such as Radicalesbians and activists like Rita Mae Brown were making demands for more inclusive feminism even through the staging of protests within the movement itself, such as the "Lavender Menace Zap" during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress to Unite Women in 1970, from which panels regarding lesbianism had been excluded. On the day of the Congress, a group of lesbian feminists infiltrated the audience and, with the help of a lighting technician, turned off the lights during one of the panels. By the time the lights had been

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7 "The Young Lords Party was dedicated to issues affecting Puerto Ricans in the United States. We were the first ones to begin to articulate an idea of reproductive justice." Denise Oliver-Velez. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, 1:02:45.

8 "Remember in the Black Liberation Movement the big debate is abortion is genocide, women should have babies for the revolution." Fran Beal. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, 34:44.

9 "In Puerto Rico, over one third of the women on the island have been sterilized. [...] Women in Puerto Rico were used as guinea pigs, as a way of controlling the population. And then, with that sterilization program being brought to New York city, we actively organized raising the consciousness about this." Denise Oliver-Velez. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, 1:02:05.

10 "And she said, 'This is like the Lavender Menace. We can't have it.'" Rita Mae Brown. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry*, 40:34.

turned back on, the women had surrounded the audience, removed their blouses to reveal Lavender Menace t-shirts, and invaded the stage to protest against their exclusion from the event.

In terms of results, second wave feminism and its mass activism are directly responsible for the passing of a number of laws in various countries, most notably regarding legal abortion and divorce, the criminalization of rape and domestic abuse (the latter term being coined specifically during this period), the wage gap and sexual discrimination on the workplace. While societal backlash was destined to strike with particular force in the 1980s, the seed was sown for activism to regenerate.

Simultaneously, despite criticism of the US- and Euro-centric nature of mainstream feminist concerns, women's rights movements and gender activism were far from absent beyond the Western front and, specifically, in Africa. While African feminisms will be analyzed in more depth in a dedicated section, it is important to note that gender activism on the African continent gathered worldwide attention and recognition through the institution of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace from 1976 to 1985. Interestingly, the Decade for Women was more or less simultaneous with two other UN decades which were entirely centered on Africa: the Transport and Communications Decade for Africa from 1978 to 1988 and the Industrial Development Decade for Africa in the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> The Decade for Women pushed the following issues to the forefront of international debate:

3519 (XXX). Women's participation in the strengthening of international peace and security and in the struggle against colonialism, racism, racial discrimination, foreign aggression and occupation and all forms of foreign domination [...]

3521 (XXX). Equality between men and women and elimination of discrimination against women [...]

3522 (XXX). Improvement of the economic status of women for their effective and speedy participation in the development of their countries<sup>12</sup>

During the Decade three international conferences were held in Mexico City, Copenhagen and Nairobi, whereby an inclusive definition of feminism was formulated, as reported by author Margaret Walters:

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11 "International Decades," *United Nations*, accessed on May 20, 2017, <<http://www.un.org/en/sections/observances/international-decades/index.html>>

12 United Nations General Assembly. *Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly during its Thirtieth Session 16 September – 17 December 1975* (New York: United Nations publication, 1976), 94-97, accessed on June 1, 2017, <[http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=a/10034\(SUPP\)](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=a/10034(SUPP))>

[Feminism] constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds ... There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In Nigeria, Margaret Ekpo was the first Aba woman to hold office in the First Republic, post-Independence. Founder of a Domestic Science and Sewing Institute in Aba, she was able to unionize Aba women in a Market Woman Association in the late 1940's, moving on to create the Aba Township Women's Association, effectively a political pressure group, in 1954. In 1961, at the onset of Nigeria's First Republic, she was elected to the Eastern Regional House of Assembly. Meanwhile, in Kenya, Professor Wangari Maathai, environmental and political activist, was not only the first woman in East and Central Africa to obtain a doctorate degree, but also became the first woman to hold the positions of chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and associate professor at the University of Nairobi in 1976 and 1977. Chairman of the National Council of Women of Kenya from 1981 to 1987, in 1976 Maathai had already come forth with the idea of "community-based tree planting."<sup>14</sup> This idea would evolve in 1977 in the foundation of the Green Belt Movement (GBM), "an environmental organization that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods."<sup>15</sup> As stated by author Robert Young, "By 2000, over 15 million trees had been planted. [...] The Greenbelt Movement has now spread to other African countries and around the world."<sup>16</sup> In 2004, Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and Adichie herself quoted her in *We Should All Be Feminists*: "The late Kenyan Nobel peace laureate Wangari Maathai put it simply and well when she said, 'The higher you go, the fewer women there are.'"<sup>17</sup>

The subsequent wave was born directly out of what Susan Faludi had described as the backlash of the 1980s and early 90s. Third wave feminism presented a generation of women who had grown in the light of the achievements and failures of the second wave and could thus reap its benefits, such as wider access to abortion, contraception and the newly born Gender Studies as an academic field. Feminism had become an object of

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13 Margaret Walters. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Kindle edition, 2005), pos. 1467.

14 "Wangari Maathai: Biography," *The Green Belt Movement*, accessed on May 27, 2017, <<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/wangari-maathai/biography>>

15 "Who We Are," *The Green Belt Movement*, accessed on May 27, 2017, <<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/who-we-are>>

16 Robert Young. *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 107.

17 Adichie. *We Should All Be Feminists* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 16.

academic study, but at the same time the grassroots aspect of activism had not died out, but merely changed shape. The first iteration of the expression 'third wave' is owed to Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, in her essay "Becoming the Third Wave", published in 1992 in *Ms.* magazine. The peculiarity of the third wave lay largely in the debate regarding its existence, in the division between what had become academic feminism, wherein activists who had once been 'second wavers' criticized the newer generation for a perceived lack of novelty, and a new form of activism tied both to pop culture and the more traditional grassroots. The debate, as author Jennifer Baumgardner words it, was the following:

The Second Wave complaint was that they had gotten there first and were not being acknowledged; furthermore, they were a lot more radical and more effective. The Third Wave complained of not being respected by the Second Wave, who seemed preoccupied with asking, "Where are the young feminists?" Yet when all of the Riot Grrrls, *Bust* readers, and Third Wave activists raised our hands to be counted, they somehow couldn't see or recognize us.<sup>18</sup>

The disconnect between the two waves seems on the one hand generational, while, on the other, it appears to be tied to modes of activism, specifically modes that were not visible in the same way to the previous wave. Indeed, the 1990s were far from suffering a dearth in feminist publications or texts focusing on women: for example, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991) and "Becoming the Third Wave" have already been mentioned, while other titles include Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (1991), Clarissa Pinkola Estes' *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1992), Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), and Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richard's *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2000). However, what is most peculiar about feminism between the 1990s and early 2000s is perhaps best represented by the Riot Grrrl movement, a feminist subsect of the punk music scene that originated in Olympia, Washington in 1992 around the band Bikini Kill and its frontman, Kathleen Hanna. Riot Grrrl is especially emblematic for the third wave because it represents a large part of an entire current of feminism that was moving separately from what had become established, academic feminism and using "tools of 90s pop culture" (50), i.e. music, shows, and xeroxed zines (as opposed to manifestos and pamphlets of the 60s and 70s) to spread their message. Once again, Baumgardner summarizes Riot Grrrl's chief principles in the following statement:

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18 Jennifer Baumgardner. *F'em!: Goo Goo, Gaga, and Some Thoughts on Balls* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2011), 18.

Riot Grrrl had at least three revolutionary tenets: demystifying men's activities (playing in bands, being loud) and opening them to women; connecting women and girls who were isolated from each other, via zines and meetings and shows; and a "pro-girl line." [...] Riot Grrrl's pro-girl line [said] that girls, far from being weak, catty, and inferior to boys, were in fact strong and able to align with one another, and had good reasons for their anger, sadness, and occasional failure to thrive. (50)

Traditional consciousness-raising and rallying takes on the new forms offered by the cultural and technological climate of the decade, but so too the aims and contents of feminism shift and broaden. Third wave feminism is considered to have been greatly informed by queer theory and the writings of bell hooks, whose *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism* (1981) examined the double effects of sexism and racism on black women and called for more inclusive politics. Interestingly, for the purpose of the wave metaphor, hooks wrote mostly 'between waves'. Moreover, third wavers may be said to have turned the famed Women's Liberation motto "the personal is political" on its head: far from shying away from the social and political import of issues arising from inequality between genders, third wave feminism nevertheless shifts the focus on the individual's experience, perhaps in adherence to the growing sense of individualism Western societies witnessed from the 1980s onwards. Third wave feminism "incorporated theory from within the Second Wave – from women of color, gay people, and transpeople – into [their] feminism and their approach to activism" (19) and, in so doing, created terminology such as slut-shaming, rape culture, and, most interestingly for the purpose of the present text, intersectionality, which Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized in 1989 within the academic legal framework to examine the double racial and sexual bias against black women in workplace discrimination lawsuits. As will be seen in the following section, it is perhaps intersectionality in its broadest sense which proved to be the most powerful inheritance from the third wave to the fourth.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the 1990s also witnessed a resurgence in gender activism on the African continent, according to Africanist Gwendolyn Mikell, a resurgence she states is a direct culmination of the political transformations many African countries experienced over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

I suspect that the greater willingness of African women to embrace feminist politics and gender representation in the 1990s is traceable to the current national crises and political transitions which have been occurring throughout the continent over the past fifteen decades.<sup>20</sup>

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19 "Third Wave insists that activists approach everything with an intersectional lens. Intersectionality is our inheritance – perhaps more than feminism." Shelby Knox, as quoted by Baumgardner, *F'em!*, 108.

20 Gwendolyn Mikell. "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation," *Feminist Studies* 21, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 408.

If the idea of a widespread consensus on the term 'feminist' remains uncertain, undoubtedly the 1980s and 1990s host an outpour of literary production and theorization of African variants of feminism. Authors such as Buchi Emecheta and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi embraced Alice Walker's 1983 definition of 'womanism' as an alternative to 'feminism', while Catherine Obianuju Acholonu and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie theorize 'motherism' and 'stiwanism' as alternatives in 1995 and 1994, respectively. Nigerian-British writer and academic Amina Mama, author of *Beyond the Masks: Race, Gender and Subjectivity* in 1995, chooses, conversely, to embrace the term 'feminism' and her definition of an African type of feminism is reported by Walters as follows:

'African women have always defined and carried out their own struggles ... [it] dates far back in our collective past', argues Amina Mama. Different women are oppressed differently: feminism must acknowledge 'differences of race, class and culture.' Feminism in Africa is heterosexual, pronatal, and concerned with 'bread, butter and power' issues.<sup>21</sup>

While the use of the wave metaphor to frame feminism from a temporal perspective is very wide, it is not in itself immune to debate. One form of criticism that may be moved against the use of this metaphor is that it codifies almost uniquely Western feminist history, placing it as representative of all gender activism, whereas the narrative of women's movements from places other than Europe, the U.S., and other Western countries only begins to be included from a certain wave onwards. Further criticism of the expression is provided by Linda Nicholson in her 2010 article, "Feminism in 'Waves': Useful Metaphor or Not?", where she states that the metaphor has outlived its usefulness for two main reasons. The first of these is that the wave metaphor is mostly found in circles and among people who already have a familiarity with feminism or know about its history, for example within the Gender Studies fields or within the realm of academic feminism.

Her second objection to the wave metaphor is based on its possibly misleading effects: by presenting feminism as a series of waves, we are led to think that it has been a movement unified on a set of ideas and that there have been moments where said movement has simply ebbed out of existence, much like a receding wave. As a matter of fact, not only have the different waves of feminism had at times deeply different objectives, but at a single given time the multiple necessities and objectives of various women's movements could not be reduced to a single, compact, and unified 'wave' of

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<sup>21</sup> Walters. *Feminism*, pos. 1792

feminism. Moreover, the wave metaphor tends to erase the ongoing gender activism that exists during and between waves, perhaps during periods of societal backlash against feminism or simply when feminist issues cannot draw enough attention to "mobilize large numbers of people in very public, noisy, and challenging ways".<sup>22</sup>

Nicholson's proposal is to do away with the wave metaphor altogether and replace it with the idea that feminism as we conceive it today has seen a flourishing or ebbing of the effects it aimed to produce in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but it is fundamentally a continuation of the activism of those decades. Her statement is the following:

Since the early 1990s, we have been in a period where the feminism that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s has both flourished in many areas and stalled in others, and this complexity cannot be adequately captured by the metaphor of a wave.<sup>23</sup>

On a further note, Nicholson also proceeds to offer a different metaphor to comprise the history and diversity of feminism, i.e. that of the kaleidoscope, wherein, she claims:

At any given moment in time, the view in a kaleidoscope is complex, showing distinct colors and patterns. With a turn of the kaleidoscope, some of these colors and patterns become more pronounced, others less so, and new patterns and colors have emerged.<sup>24</sup>

Another possible expression suited to replace the wave metaphor is provided by Ednie Kaeh Garrison in her essay "Are We On a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios and Third Wave Feminism" and it is that of the radio wavelength. Indeed, according to Garrison, while the metaphor of ocean waves suggests a representation of gender activism as a unified phenomenon, radio waves better account for the complexity, variety, and plurality not only of movements, but also within one same movement. In Garrison's words, to be on a wavelength may comprise:

[being] on a wavelength in the sense of seeing something in the same way as someone else, but it might also mean [being] on a wavelength in the sense of being between – to be in translation or in process or a state of liminality, which doesn't necessarily have to be a lull or "doldrums" if we understand a wave frequency as an undulating carrier current through which we transmit and receive, synthesize and morph, network and coalesce. In this sense radio waves are both a wavelength on the spectrum of electromagnetic waves, and are comprised of multiple (possibly infinite) wavelengths or frequencies within its own bandwidth.<sup>25</sup>

In consideration of these arguments, it may nevertheless prove interesting to examine

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22 Linda Nicholson. "Feminism in 'Waves': Useful Metaphor or Not?" *New Politics* XII, no. 4 (2010) accessed on March 30, 2017, <<http://newpol.org/content/feminism-waves-useful-metaphor-or-not> >

23 Nicholson, "Feminism in 'Waves'"

24 Nicholson, "Feminism in 'Waves'"

25 Ednie Kaeh Garrison. "Are We On a Wavelength Yet? On Feminist Oceanography, Radios and Third Wave Feminism," *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement*, ed. Jo Reger (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 248.

the benefits to the use of the wave metaphor, why it is still so widespread, and why the present text will continue to refer to it. First of all, Western feminism may have taken to the metaphor so effortlessly first and foremost for the sense of consolidation of a tradition the wave metaphor provides. Indeed, the second wave of feminism in particular sought a historic antecedent in the suffrage movement, in order to prove women's liberation was not an aberration, but rather a new expression of a century's worth of gender activism. While the nature of the suffrage movement and its definition as feminism may be still an issue of debate today (it is worth noting that many suffragettes would have balked at being labeled feminists), it is evident that, at least for modern feminism, however varied and diverse, the wave metaphor consolidates its appeal in legitimizing the various women's movements throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century as part of a history and not isolated, unrelated events.

Second of all, while it is undeniably true that gender activism exists between waves and is at risk of being overlooked by the use of the metaphor, it is equally true that the wave metaphor appears to be particularly poignant when examining the phenomenon of backlash. Author Susan Faludi introduced the concept of societal backlash against feminism in her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. In this text, Faludi describes the mid-to-late-80s and the early 1990s as a period in time in which "the slightest sign that women were exercising their independence set the culture hounds to baying."<sup>26</sup> As such, backlash is described as a phenomenon which follows periods of high-profile activism and campaigning for women's rights (Faludi's perspective, for example, takes into account the 1980s as a direct consequence of the great import and mass participation women's movements had in the 1960s and 70s) and which consists in insidious, persistent, and at times very strong negative reactions in the media, politics, and popular culture to female emancipation. The most subtle element in this construction, Faludi states, is that backlash frames feminism and female advancement as responsible for the demise of women. In her own words:

The truth is that the last decade [1980s] has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall. (9-10)

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26 Susan Faludi. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1991), IX.

While the failures 1980s media and pop culture ascribed to feminism are highly debatable<sup>27</sup>, what is interesting to the present examination of feminist waves in relation to backlash is precisely how far from random the origins of this phenomenon are:

But if fear and loathing of feminism is a sort of perpetual viral condition in our culture, it is not always in an acute stage; its symptoms subside and resurface periodically. [...] These outbreaks are backlashes because they have always arisen in reaction to women's "progress," caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status, efforts that have been interpreted time and again by men [...] as spelling their own masculine doom. (10-11)

If, therefore, outbreaks of backlash could be reputed akin to periods of abeyance in the mainstream representation of feminism and female agency (obviously notwithstanding the currents of ongoing gender activism that do not always elicit the attention of mass media), the wave metaphor could be said to reinstate its import. Indeed, the wave, with its imagery of receding and advancing with great strength, accounts for those periods where media, politics, and popular culture call for feminism's death knell, only to be swept by the tide of a resurgence in mainstream debate on women's rights and new mass demonstrations.

Finally, however simplistic, the wave metaphor offers a clear and widespread convention, a common framework for the representation of major achievements or events within a timeline of (mainly Western) feminist historiography. As a matter of fact, the reasons the present text will continue to refer to feminism in waves and specifically to a fourth wave are chiefly the clarity and common use of conventional language and the ability of the wave imagery to account for the importance of phenomena such as backlash. On a further note, while it is true that waves belong primarily to Western historiography, this text focuses primarily on feminism's fourth wave, which, at its core, is arguably the most globalized and inclusive one. The argument underpinning the present text, moreover, is that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who declares herself unconcerned with academic feminism<sup>28</sup> but nevertheless embraces much of its groundwork terminology, is a representative of the latest wave of feminism

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27 "[...] the afflictions ascribed to feminism are all myths. From "the man shortage" to "the infertility epidemic" to "female burnout" to "toxic day care," these so-called female crises have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood." Faludi, *Backlash*, 7.

28 "In using everyday examples, it's my way of saying, "Feminism matters." [...] I wouldn't survive in academic feminism because I don't think I would know how to follow all the rules of how you're supposed to say things and all of that." "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria", 16:55.

on a global scale, as not only is she a figure that crosses cultural boundaries (Nigeria and the US), but so too is her work, at a time when technology affords individuals the possibility of being global about their activism.

## ***2.2 Viral and International***

An early periodization places feminism's fourth wave at the onset of the 2010s, however any attempt at chronology should, first of all, undergo two preliminary considerations: the debate concerning the existence of a resurgence in feminist activism and the socio-cultural and political climate of the 2000s. In regards to the former, dispute has consistently focused on much of the same criticism that argued against the existence of a third wave, i.e. organization and mass demonstrations not being as frequent or as visible as during the second wave, a supposed dearth in seminal texts, a lack of innovative and politicized content, and, finally, the alleged disavowal and ambivalence felt by young girls towards feminism. As author Jessalynn Keller exemplifies:

On Saturday, 10 November 2012, *CNN.com* published an article asking: "Where are all the millennial feminists?" The article, written by college student and former CNN intern Hannah Weinberger, grapples with the supposed disavowal of feminism by young women today. [...] This all-too-common narrative is often employed in mainstream media to suggest that feminism is no longer relevant to girls and young women – a dominant discourse of postfeminist media culture that has been documented and analyzed by several feminist researchers.<sup>29</sup>

And if this argument of young women supposedly no longer needing feminism and the concept itself of 'postfeminist' discourse may be connected to the phenomenon of backlash, more insidious yet is the argument that a younger generation of feminists simply has nothing new to say or no truly innovative way to voice it, as it comes from within older branches of feminist movements themselves. This is, for example, the position of Debbie Stoller, co-founder and editor in chief of *BUST* magazine, who states the following:

I don't see a Fourth Wave yet. There's definitely a younger generation of feminists. The thing to me that defined the Third Wave was a different set of strategies. The First Wave had a particular set of causes. The Second Wave had a new set of causes. The Third Wave pioneered new strategies – using popular culture, since we recognize the importance of that in our lives, and the idea of reclaiming. [...] I don't yet see new strategies coming out of younger feminists. In fact, what I see a lot in the younger generation is a sort of reversion to the Second Wave. [...] I don't see them using those

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29 Jessalynn Keller. "Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls' Blogs as Sites of Contemporary Feminist Activism," *Girlhood and the Politics of Place*, eds. Claudia Mitchell and Carrie Rentschler, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 261.

tools [social networking and web 2.0] to present a different set of ideas or solutions.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, while the reasoning underpinning these argumentations is valid, there may be an alternative narrative motivating both the appearance of disaffection on the part of young women and the idea that the use of the Internet is no different in raising awareness than it was during the third wave. In response to criticism against the existence of a third wave, Imelda Whelehan said, "What is the fear now, I wonder, in reinvention?"<sup>31</sup> and this same concept may be applied to the idea of a fourth wave: there is no dearth in content or tools, but an adaptation and transformation of what has been inherited from the past; young activism is not absent, it is merely occurring in places that differ from traditional second wave or even third wave public forums and it is occurring with the use of tools that have a generational bias. If a resurgence in feminist engagement is to be theorized, it would need to be considered as increasingly disjointed from what has become mainstream, academic feminism and active in places that are often invisible to previous 'wavers'. In *Making Activism Accessible: Exploring Girls' Blogs as Sites of Contemporary Feminist Activism*, Keller points out how previous generations' inability to consider newer gender activism has a precise cause:

I suspect that this may be because girls' activism can be difficult to locate, because, in part of the unique forms that it takes. Consequently, girls' activism is too often made invisible to adult researchers looking for more traditional activist practices that feminists have used historically, such as public demonstrations, legal challenges, and commercial boycotts.<sup>32</sup>

These unique forms are concentrated in Internet spaces which are uniquely characteristic to the web 2.0 and which will be examined more in depth shortly.

The second preliminary consideration that must be expanded upon concerns the climate from which a resurgence in activism, or a new wave, found its origin. Indeed, the political and social climate of the 2000s was undoubtedly shaped by two major events, the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001 (and the subsequent war on terror that ensued) and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. In this regard, the argument supported in this text is that the aforementioned events are both majorly representative as cause of a backlash or regression in media discussion and consideration of feminism and feminist policies and birth ground for a subsequent surge of activism, respectively. Shelby Knox,

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30 Debbie Stoller, as quoted by Baumgardner, *F'em!*, 80-81.

31 Imelda Whelehan. "Foreword," *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration (Expanded Second Edition)*, eds. Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), XV.

32 Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 261.

"itinerant feminist organizer"<sup>33</sup> and promoter of fourth wave feminism, claims that the generation that was either born after 9/11 or very young in that decade are to be considered children of the backlash, as opposed to third wavers, who grew up in a world that had been very recently impacted by the achievements of second wave feminism. Knox thus states that:

By contrast, my generation has two very different qualities: we are "backlash babies" – our moms thought if they didn't have it all, it was their own fault – and we are post 9/11. [...] I think a lot of our cultural signifiers, our media, what we have grown up with, are characterized by the regression of gender roles after 9/11.<sup>34</sup>

Knox largely builds upon the argument expressed by Susan Faludi in *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (2007). Therein, Faludi states that, post 9/11, American media reverted to a social narrative akin to that of the 1950s, where the 'manly man' was the sole provider for the nuclear family. This represented an attempt to bolster a sense of national unity in the aftermath of the attacks. From the book's introduction:

In the aftermath of the attacks, the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family "togetherness", redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood. [...] The nation's men, from the inhabitants of the White House on down, were reportedly assuming a hard-boiled comportment last seen in post-World War II cinema.<sup>35</sup>

The women, on the other hand, began disproportionately being represented as frail, as victims in need of safe-keeping and, despite statistics reporting that fatalities during the attacks had been mostly male, as suburban wives and mothers living in fear. Once again, in Faludi's terms:

In the post-9/11 reenactment of the fifties Western, women figured largely as vulnerable maidens. [...] In the absence of female victims at the site, the media substituted homemakers in the suburbs held hostage by fear and little children traumatized by television footage.<sup>36</sup>

The regression of gender roles to a strict, 'traditional' binary had the effect of imposing narrower limits of femininity and female agency, as any discourse considered subversive or deviant from the dominant one could risk undermining the psychologically 'safe' concept of nostalgic national unity.

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33 Knox, as quoted by Baumgardner, *F'em!*, 106.

34 Baumgardner, *F'em!*, 108.

35 Susan Faludi. *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (New York: Picador, Kindle edition, 2007), pos. 194-205.

36 Faludi. *The Terror Dream*, pos. 231.

The financial crisis of 2007-2008, on the other hand, holds a special status, insofar as the social climate wrought by the stringent politics it caused compounded with the already rising tide of backlash against feminism, however, the social discontent brought on by the crisis (especially among the younger generation) was also at the basis for a worldwide sweep of new activism. First of all, starting with the nationwide house-price slump in the US in 2006, the plummeting of global interest rates, and culminating with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, the financial crisis had rippling effects worldwide and it is estimated these effects are still being felt ten years later. The necessary economic consequence to such widespread and profound recession is a sweeping wind of austerity measures, which nevertheless greatly impinge on women in a world where disparity in wages remains the norm. For example, Britain's Fawcett Society, a campaign for the equality of women, found in 2011 that women face "'triple jeopardy' as a result of austerity measures – being disproportionately affected by cuts to public sector jobs, benefits and services."<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, the global crisis also proved to be an adequate breeding ground for multiple movements over the world, two of the most iconic in recent memory being the Arab Spring of 2010 and the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011. 'Arab Spring' is an umbrella term meant to comprise the social unrest and revolutionary mass demonstrations in multiple countries of the Maghreb and Middle East between 2010 and 2011, starting with the Tunisian Revolution of 2010, which in turn ignited protests in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria in 2011. The revolutionary wave was a reaction to repressive government policies, authoritarian regimes, poverty and socioeconomic inequality, and economic recession and produced different outcomes for the various countries involved, ranging from regimes being overthrown to change in governance and government policy, to civil war. However, aside from the international import of the protests, what is particularly interesting is the impact social media had in rallying and organizing protesters and spreading awareness worldwide:

In the 2011 "Arab Spring" protests, social media networks played an important role in the rapid disintegration of at least two regimes, Tunisia and Egypt, while also contributing to sociopolitical mobilization in Bahrain and Syria. [...] Overall, the input of the social media networks was critical in performing two overlapping functions: (a) organizing the protests and (b) disseminating information about them, including publicizing protesters' demands internationally (Facebook reportedly outmatched Al

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<sup>37</sup> Kira Cochrane. *All the Rebel Women: The rise of the fourth wave of feminism*, (London: Guardian Shorts, Kindle edition, 2013), pos. 130.

Jazeera in at least the speed of news dissemination).<sup>38</sup>

Likewise, the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011 was not only inspired by the revolutionary climate generated by the Arab Spring, it also utilized similar circuits for coordination. In point of fact, the movement originated as a response to a call to action made by an online, anti-consumerist Canadian magazine, *Adbusters*, after which a website was founded on June 14 2011, *OccupyWallSt.org*, and so too a Facebook page of the same name. The Occupy Wall Street movement sought to protest against the socioeconomic iniquity created by the modern capitalist system and its physical realization culminated in the sit-in protest in Zuccotti Park, inside New York's Manhattan financial district starting September 17 2011. From the website's About section:

Occupy Wall Street is a people-powered movement that began on September 17, 2011 in Liberty Square in Manhattan's Financial District, and has spread to over 100 cities in the United States and actions in over 1,500 cities globally. #ows is fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process, and the role of Wall Street in creating an economic collapse that has caused the greatest recession in generations. The movement is inspired by popular uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, and aims to fight back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future.<sup>39</sup>

While the protesters were evacuated from the park the following November, the movement proved to be both a symptom of the same social unrest at the basis of multiple activist movements and an inspiration for further activism for a variety of purposes and causes, including feminism, on a worldwide scale. In a fashion not dissimilar to what had happened with female suffrage campaigning arising from universal suffrage campaigns during the first wave of feminism or women's liberation and women's movements surfacing from larger civil rights movements during the second, the impetus for widespread, organized gender activism partially resurfaced from within larger social movements. As Kira Cochrane states in *All the Rebel Women: The Rise of the Fourth Wave of Feminism*:

New movements struck up – students against tuition fees, the public against cuts, Occupy tents pitched in cities all over the country. Some of the people politicized in these movements soon filtered into feminism, which was burgeoning again, out of necessity, exactly fifty years after the start of the second wave, a hundred years after the peak of the first.<sup>40</sup>

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38 Ekaterina Stepanova. "The Role of Information Communication Technologies in the 'Arab Spring': Implications Beyond the Region," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 159 (May 2011): 1-2.

39 "About," *OccupyWallSt.org*, accessed on April 10, 2017, <<http://occupywallst.org/about/>>

40 Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, pos. 403.

The peculiarity of this new resurgence of gender activism was partly inherited from the third wave and partly only feasible due to the possibilities and breadth of scope offered by the web 2.0 and its mass social-networking system. Indeed, while a continuity of content is identifiable between third and fourth wave, especially in regards to queer theory, intersectionality, and the infiltration and analysis of pop culture, perhaps the most powerful continuity lies in the prolonged gap between academic feminism and other forms of activism. In fact, it has already been stated that fourth wave discussion, particularly among the very young, is preponderantly found in virtual spaces that are not necessarily accessible to that older generation of feminists who often make up the academic branch of feminism itself. In this regard, Ealasaid Munro, in relaying Julia Schuster's analysis of contemporary feminist engagement in New Zealand, posits that:

online activism is often the preserve of the young, and that due to the closed nature of some social networks, feminist discussion is often 'hidden' from those who are not sufficiently networked. For Schuster, this may create a divide between young feminists and older activists, as the new wave of feminists unwittingly hide their politics from their older peers. Many of those academics in a position to research and publish on feminism belong to this older age group, hence academic feminism is arguably guilty of failing to properly examine the shape that the fourth wave is currently taking.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, however less visible the awareness and consciousness-raising being carried out by the younger activists may be, there is far from a dearth in either literary output or traditional physical protest.

First of all, considering solely non-fictional publications, texts which focus on feminism, women or women's issues include Jessica Valenti's *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity Is Hurting Young Women* (2009), Natasha Walter's *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (2010), Lorella Zanardo's *Il corpo delle donne* (2010), a literary companion to her viral 2009 documentary *Il corpo delle donne (Women's Bodies)*, Cordelia Fine's *Delusions of Gender: The Real Science Behind Sex Differences* (2010), Peggy Orenstein's *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011), Caitlin Moran's *How to Be a Woman* (2011), *I Am Malala: The Story of the Girl Who Stood Up for Education and was Shot by the Taliban* by Malala Yousafzai and Christina Lamb (2013), Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist: Essays* (2014), and Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014). Aside from the continued output by 'veteran' activists like Alix Kates Shulman, Gloria Steinem, and bell hooks, texts such as The Rio Declaration on

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41 Ealasaid Munro. "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 24.

Engaging Men and Boys on Achieving Gender Equality (2009) and, most importantly for the interests of the present text, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014) and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) testify to a production of feminist manifestos and calls to action. Likewise, film, music, and popular culture in general have not been devoid of feminist issues of representation, ranging from the production of documentaries such as *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (2014), concerned with a complex depiction of the second wave of feminism in the US and newly available to a large, international audience through the Netflix platform, to an all-female reboot of the classic 1980s film *Ghostbusters* (2016), which, aside from the obvious issue raised by the cast's gender, explores intricacies tied to the female gaze in film. From young film star Emma Watson speaking out about the importance of gender activism as a UN Women Goodwill Ambassador<sup>42</sup> to pop icon Beyoncé performing with a monumental 'Feminist' sign behind her onstage<sup>43</sup>, popular culture, however at times more interested in marketing a 'feminist product' rather than spreading ideals, has demonstrated that in the 2010s feminism has once again regained the stage as a high-profile issue.

Secondly, the fact that for younger branches the conversation on women's issues has moved to online spaces does not necessarily mean that more traditional forms of activism have been entirely circumvented. As a matter of fact, 2011 alone counts two egregious examples of feminist mass demonstrations and protests: the first SlutWalk rally in Toronto, which witnessed 3,000 protesters march against rape culture on April 3 2011 and sparked dozens of other rallies in cities all over the world, and the Se Non Ora Quando (SNOQ) protests in Italy on February 13 2011, which brought over one million people together in Rome and one hundred other cities to protest against the representation of women as sex objects in Italian media. Moreover, a brutal gang rape on a whiteline bus in Delhi in 2012, which resulted in the death of the victim, a young paramedic student, was the starting point for a wave of protest that coursed through India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka from December 2012, after the death

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42 "Emma Watson: Gender equality is your issue too", UN Women, 20 September 2014, accessed on April 9, 2017, <<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/9/emma-watson-gender-equality-is-your-issue-too>>

43 "Beyoncé, in the midst of an epic 15 minute medley at Sunday night's MTV Video Music awards, performed her song "Flawless" in front of a giant screen blazoned with the word 'FEMINIST'." Jessica Valenti. "Beyoncé's 'Flawless' feminist act at the VMAs leads the way for other women", *The Guardian*, August 24, 2014, accessed on April 12, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/aug/25/beyonce-flawless-feminist-vmas>>

of the young woman, onwards. The massive import of the protest was caused not only by the horrid details of the crime itself but also from the generalized culture regarding rape and sexual violence, as expressed by Kavita Krishnan, of All-India Progressive Women's Association, in *All the Rebel Women*:

[Krishnan] says the outcry was driven by the crime itself, but also by cumulative anger. 'There was this particular incident of brutality,' she says, 'but women protesters were expressing anger against a wider culture too. They were saying, "don't tell us how to dress, tell men not to rape." From the first day of the protests it was very clear that the anger was not just against this one rape, but against the habit of blaming women for rape.'<sup>44</sup>

More recently, the Women's March on Washington on January 21 2017, an inclusive event aimed at demonstrating against systematic inequality on the basis of gender, race, and social status, gathered an estimate of over 500,000 protesters in Washington D.C. alone, and just under 5 million total protesters worldwide in the 673 Sister Marches that took place in various cities and countries over the world, such as Canada, Peru, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Italy, Spain, France, the UK, Russia, and more.<sup>45</sup> Chimamanda Adichie herself attended the D.C. protest, documenting it through photos of herself, the crowd of protesters, and various protest signs, which she subsequently posted to her Facebook account on January 22.<sup>46</sup>

A further point of interest in these protests and their worldwide spectrum lies in their organization. Indeed, the coordination of events in multiple cities around the world at the same time has been rendered possible through the use of the Internet, which allowed the creation of virtual spaces where individuals could discuss and organize protest across borders in real time. Events such as the ones mentioned, SlutWalk, SNOQ, and the Women's March, all began as projects on an online space, which benefited from the breadth of reach of platforms like Facebook to coordinate and spread awareness. As a matter of fact, SlutWalk was organized primarily through tools such as Facebook, Twitter and WordPress and the amount and width of response astounded the founders as well, as exemplified in the words of Heather Jarvis, co-founder of SlutWalk:

There were six weeks between the idea and the rally itself, during which they [the founders] set up a Facebook page, Twitter account, and a WordPress website, to share information. Suddenly, people across Canada, the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand were getting in contact, says Jarvis, saying, 'we have this same problem here.'

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44 Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, pos. 511.

45 Data retrieved on April 7, 2017 from the Women's March on Washington website at <<https://www.womensmarch.com/sisters>>

46 Adichie. "The Women's March on Washington," Facebook post, January 22, 2017, accessed on April 7, 2017, <<https://www.facebook.com/chimamandaadichie/posts/10154740033430944>>

We need one of these too.' The rally was yet to be held, and already it was becoming a movement, a sign of how quickly a strong message can now go viral.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, SNOQ organizers had set up a blog and a Facebook page to launch a petition and coordinate the protest, while the Women's March started as a Facebook event page, with the subsequent creation of a dedicated webpage, Instagram and Twitter accounts, and a livestream of the march itself on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other platforms.

The events previously described illustrate the profound import web 2.0 tools offer in organizing and coordinating activism, however these are not the only incarnations of the virtual places where feminist discussion takes place and potentially transforms into physical activism. Moreover, the scope of online activism cannot just be resolved in facilitated coordination of physical demonstrations. In the first place, web tools may range in nature and purpose, beginning with websites and forums, the mediums most similar to the use of the Internet made during the third wave as well, and proceeding on to blogging platforms like WordPress and Tumblr, in which single posts made by a user are potentially rendered visible to the entire platform through the use of a tagging system, Facebook pages, groups, and events, where content may be shared not only with a wide, potentially international circle of users but within a more local community as well (including acquaintances and family of a single user), and Twitter hashtags, where, much like the aforementioned tagging system, content is rendered visible and grouped for the entire platform as a potential audience. Online services such as the ones mentioned count millions of users worldwide and the use that is made of them for the purpose of activism is often born out of contextual necessity, i.e. single-issue campaigns or slogans meant to raise awareness on a specific issue. For example, the Who Needs Feminism? project was created within the Women in the Public Sphere: History, Theory, and Practice class at Duke University, in the US, with the purpose of making a difference in the cultural climate and, on a larger scale, overturning the negative connotations society and media attach to the term 'feminism' by making feminism accessible through an array of personal definitions and necessities. While students recruited acquaintances to hold signs with their own version of "I need feminism because..." written on them, shot photographs and then created posters from these pictures, it was only once Facebook and Tumblr pages were created to upload the posters online that the project took on a life of its own. In the words of Rachel F.

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<sup>47</sup> Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, pos. 536.

Seidman, teacher of the Women in the Public Sphere class at Duke University:

The combination of a digital world, a combustible political moment, and the clever simplicity of their approach meant that what happened next went far beyond anything we expected or had prepared for. They had set their sights on changing campus culture at Duke, but the students' campaign went viral and quickly took on national and international dimensions. Within days the Facebook page had thousands of "likes", and women and men from around the world started sending in their own "I need feminism because..." pictures to the Tumblr site.<sup>48</sup>

In a similar fashion, the #SayHerName campaign was launched by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) on May 20 2015 as a New York-based event, #SayHerName: A Vigil in Memory of Black Women and Girls Killed by the Police, in order to spread awareness on how police violence against African American women and the double racial and gender bias that causes it are too often completely overlooked by both mainstream media and activists. The AAPF subsequently produced a brief and a social media guide, calling for activists to utilize social media to spread campaign content (along with a list of viable tweets and hashtags), much like what had already been done by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. An excerpt from the #SayHerName social media guide states the following:

The #BlackLivesMatter movement has shown that social media can be a powerful rallying force for social movements. Activists are now able to document injustices, spread information and mobilize the public in real time. As we strive for the inclusion of Black women in our efforts to combat anti-Black police violence, it is critical to continue building on the social media impetus generated by the resurgent racial justice movement.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, the Everyday Sexism Project was founded as a website in 2012 by Laura Bates as a platform in which women could, anonymously or not, submit their personal stories of everyday sexism. Within one year of its creation the website counted almost 50,000 experiences posted and had spread to seventeen countries. A Twitter page was also created in March 2012, counting 266,000 followers as of April 10 2017<sup>50</sup>, and the #everydaysexism hashtag is used concomitantly by users on the platform to share experiences and signal them to the Everyday Sexism Project. Additionally, crowdfunding may be an efficient tool in enabling the production of feminist content, as

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48 Rachel F. Seidman. "Who Needs Feminism? Lessons from a Digital World," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 552.

49 African American Policy Forum. *#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women, A Social Media Guide* (2015): 4. Accessed on April 13, 2017, <<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/53f20d90e4b0b80451158d8c/t/555e2412e4b0bd5f4da5d3a4/1432232978932/SAYHERNAME+Social+Media+Guide.compressed.pdf>>

50 Data retrieved on April 10, 2017 from the @EverydaySexism Twitter webpage at <<https://twitter.com/EverydaySexism>>

proven by the success of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, one hundred stories of aspirational female role models through history (illustrated by one hundred female artists) and currently the most funded book in the history of crowdfunding.<sup>51</sup>

On a specifically African front, gender activism – be it feminism or a variant – has taken to web 2.0 tools on the continent as well. For example, the African Feminist Forum (AFF) is “a biennial conference that brings together African feminist activists to deliberate on issues of key concern to the movement.”<sup>52</sup> Founded in 2006 in Accra, Ghana, the AFF has since convened in Uganda in 2008 and in Senegal in 2010.<sup>53</sup> The AFF incarnates the scope and possibility of fourth wave feminism not only because of its birth in the 2000's, but namely also because of its online presence. As a matter of fact, the AFF has created both a website and a Facebook page which has, as of June 10, 2017, 3423 total followers.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the AFF also has 2082 followers on its Twitter account (created in 2010) as of June 10, 2017<sup>55</sup> and has launched the Twitter hashtag #Afrifem to give visibility to debate. As far as the Twitter platform is concerned, the case of the #BeingFemaleInNigeria hashtag is particularly noteworthy. The hashtag was created in 2015 after an Abuja-based book club launched a debate regarding Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* and decided to move the conversation online.<sup>56</sup> The debate then took on a life of its own, according to Ainehi Edoro: “The hashtag has been used more than 54,000 times on Twitter, according to tracking service Topsy, with people commenting on everything from the role of religion, offering examples of modern-day misogyny and giving credit to Adichie.”<sup>57</sup> When examining the impact of gender activism online, however, blogs cannot be neglected, especially considering the wealth of blogs dedicated to African feminism and gender activism. For

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51 "Francesca Cavallo and Elena Favilli launched their crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter and IndieGogo, with the aim of raising \$40,000 (£32,000) to create and print 1,000 copies. They ended up raising more than \$1m, with the book becoming the most highly funded original book in the history of crowdfunding." Emine Saner. "Books for girls, about girls: the publishers trying to balance the bookshelves," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2017, accessed on April 13, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/17/childrens-books-for-girls-publishers-writers-gender-imbalance>>

52 African Feminist Forum's Facebook page, accessed on June 10, 2017, <[https://www.facebook.com/pg/AfricanFeministForum/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/AfricanFeministForum/about/?ref=page_internal)>

53 "About," African Feminist Forum, accessed on June 10, 2017, <<http://www.africanfeministforum.com/about/>>

54 African Feminist Forum, Facebook post.

55 Data retrieved on June 10, 2017 from the @AFF001 Twitter webpage at <<https://twitter.com/AFF001>>

56 Ainehi Edoro. "#BeingFemaleInNigeria: book club ignites everyday sexism debate," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2015, accessed on June 8, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/01/being-female-in-nigeria-chimamanda-adichie-twitter-sexism>>

57 Edoro, "#BeingFemaleInNigeria."

example, Nigerian-born journalist Minna Salami is the creator and manager of the *MsAfropolitan* blog, Twitter, and Facebook pages. *MsAfropolitan* ranges from articles on pop culture and social criticism, to literature and the arts, always with particular attention to feminism within the African context. Salami provides masterlists of African feminist resources and readings to peruse, so as to promote the notion of feminism as 'authentically' African. In point of fact, her position on feminism and the African context is the following:

It is so belittling to suggest that there are parts of shared human culture such as feminism that are not authentically African. Africa is not a continent in outer space, it is part of the world. Not only is Africa part of the world, it is a force of resistance in the world. So long as feminism is the global movement of resistance to gender inequality, which it is, then feminism is inevitably and indispensably African.<sup>58</sup>

Salami is a writer for *The Guardian* and runs a high-profile blog, counting 8880 followers on her Facebook page and over 16,000 followers on her Twitter account (as of 11 June 2017). However, she is far from the only influential voice originating on an online platform. Other African feminist blogs include Zimbabwean activist Fungai Machirori's *Her Zimbabwe*, "an initiative founded in 2012 seeking to harness the potential of digital media to share and tell Zimbabwean women's stories, as well as nurture young women's digital activism."<sup>59</sup> Activist Brenda Wambui is the co-founder of *Brainstorm*, a blog dedicated to Kenyan social and political commentary. In an article for *The Guardian*, Wambui states:

To be feminist in Africa is to be at a crossroads. It is to stand for women and their humanity in a deeply patriarchal society, where empowerment of women is thought of as un-African or unchristian. It is to fight injustices towards women, like early marriage and FGM [female genital mutilation], while still fighting modern forms of misogyny like online harassment and rape culture. [...] However, there is a lot to be hopeful for. Discussions are being had by women, and men, online and offline about equality.<sup>60</sup>

It is not merely Western feminism, therefore, that has begun to use web 2.0 tools and platforms to convey its message, but the use of online platforms for activist purposes is shared on an international level.

In the second place, whilst analyzing the web tools available to gender activism in this new 'wave' of feminism, Jessalynn Keller illustrates how the peculiarity of online

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58 Minna Salami. "Is there an authentic African position on feminism?" *MsAfropolitan* (blog), May 22, 2017, <<http://www.msafropolitan.com/2017/05/authentic-african-position-on-feminism.html>>

59 "About Her," *Her Zimbabwe*, accessed on June 11, 2017, <<http://herzimbabwe.co.zw/about-her/>>

60 Maeve Shearlaw. "An influential, vibrant, exciting force: defining African feminism," *The Guardian*, April 29, 2014, accessed on June 11, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/29/defining-african-feminism-join-the-debate>>

activism lies in its accessibility (especially for middle-class youth) and its threefold scope: education, community building, and visibility.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, a 2013 report by Columbia University's Barnard Center for Research on Women revealed that women between the ages of 18 and 29 make up the "power users of social networking".<sup>62</sup> The accessibility of online activism lies partially within the greater trend of separation between academic feminism and more 'grassroots' feminism previously mentioned and partially for material reasons. As a matter of fact, blogging, for example, is an accessible form of participating in discussion on social issues for anyone in possession of a stable Internet connection, but without the resources (for reasons ranging from geographical location, to class, financial status, age, race, disability, etc.) to participate in more traditional activism and demonstrations.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, online debate and action could instill a sense of greater security to potential activists who may constitute a category at risk in traditional protest environments, e.g. the multiple reported cases of sexual harassment during the Occupy Wall Street protests (to the point of requiring the construction of a separate 'safe-zone' for female protesters in Zuccotti Park)<sup>64</sup> illustrates how the threat of gender-based violence and harassment potentially puts women (especially minors) at risk even in protest environments.

In regards to the threefold scope of online activism, Keller identifies the educational potential of online activism in spreading information through multiple platforms, such as Tumblr and Facebook, so that younger activists in particular take on the role of educating their peers on feminist issues and on the nature of feminism itself, in a flow of information that is "characterized by the participatory nature of the web".<sup>65</sup> On a further note, in quoting Jessica Taft's research on girl anti-globalization activism, Keller claims that a significant part of the educational purpose of online activism lies in the production of "dissident feeling".<sup>66</sup> Keller's (and Taft's) claim is the following:

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61 "Since I am suggesting that we must consider blogging as an accessible practice of feminist activism for some girls, it is necessary to better understand exactly how blogging *works* as activism so I will now turn to discuss the ways in which girls use the space of their blogs to engage in three key and interrelated activist practices I have identified: education, community building, and making feminism visible." Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 266.

62 Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?", 23.

63 "Rory's and Kristie's comments highlight how important blogging is as an accessible way for girls with limited resources – often because of age, but also perhaps gender, class, race, location, and ability – to participate in activism." Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 266.

64 "Everyone has the Right to Occupy Space, Safely," OccupyWallSt.org, November 8, 2011, accessed on April 15, 2017, <<http://occupywallst.org/article/everyone-has-right-occupy-space-safely/>>

65 Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 268.

66 Jessica Taft, as quoted by Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 268.

According to Taft, this *feeling production* is a significant, yet often overlooked goal of education as an activist practice, and must be acknowledged as legitimate. Indeed, feeling production is certainly evident in many of the images and much of the information circulated by girl bloggers.<sup>67</sup>

Community building, on the other hand, is necessary in sustaining activism, Keller illustrates, as "participating in [a] community then ensures its continuation, functioning as activism by motivating oneself and others to continue the struggle" (269). The feature of interest in online community building is found in the means through which it is achieved, namely through "the promotion of other blogs through blogrolls and post features, sharing other girls' stories through reposting/reblogging, inviting contributions from other girl bloggers, and participating on comment boards" (270). Finally, in regards to online activism being invested in the promotion of visibility for feminism, Keller states that it is far from a new concept, relating "feminists' desire to ensure their public visibility" to "women's historical exclusion from the public sphere and relegation to the private sphere of the home" (274). According to Keller, the attention to cultural production, the media, and the representation of feminism is akin to Nancy Fraser's definition of 'recognition feminism', i.e. a form of feminism which "emphasizes the cultural and symbolic as sites of social change" (273), which was particularly popular during the third wave. While the long-term effects of the online forms of activism born with the fourth wave are yet to be proven, it may already be stated that the total shut-down of the efficacy of the Internet as a tool for activism through the accusation of 'slacktivism', i.e. the idea that online campaigns and online participation do little in producing actual results, completely ignores both feeling production and the value of recognition feminism in promoting visibility.

As a final, crucial point, the matter of identifying Adichie within a possible fourth wave of feminism lies less in the chronology of her age and more in the success she has had in co-opting strategies of the fourth wave and, in turn, in her message being co-opted both by mainstream media and online platforms of activism and discussion. In an era where digital media allows geographical borders to be virtually crossed in real time and where social networking platforms group users from all over the world in communities, Adichie herself is representative of a cross-cultural shift, both in terms of geography and mediums of communication. Indeed, she reflects the fourth wave involvement in intersectionality and, more broadly, the accumulation of conflating

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67 Keller, "Making Activism Accessible," 268.

identities on her own person, as a multifaceted, multicultural figure, Nigerian and Igbo, but also living in US society and adopting these multiple realities as the scope and backdrop of her writing. For example, while novels such as *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are more strongly tied to Nigerian (and particularly Igbo) culture, politics, and history, texts such as *The Thing Around Your Neck* and *Americanah* are deeply involved with themes of displacement from Nigeria to other countries, specifically the US and the UK, and how that reshapes the cultural identity of the individual and their relationship to both country of origin and country of stay. Interestingly, *Purple Hibiscus* itself originated from Adichie's profound sense of nostalgia while living in Connecticut and not having returned to Nigeria in years:

Indeed, *Purple Hibiscus* was born out of such longing. 'I was living in Connecticut and hadn't been back to Nigeria for four years. I was intensely homesick. It was winter here and terribly cold. I looked out and saw this blanket of white and thought: "I want home."<sup>68</sup>

Adichie does not cross borders solely in her writing, however, but also in the breadth of her media presence, which covers simultaneously more traditional authorial territory and new areas of communication, mainstream media and online content. She is at once recipient of prestigious literary awards, such as the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, while at the same time featuring in two viral videos on both the TED and YouTube platforms. Her visibility extends beyond the literary and academic fields, through distinctions such as honorary doctorates at Eastern Connecticut State University and John Hopkins University and the Barnard Medal of Distinction, and into popular culture, as testified by her being credited on Beyoncé's \*\*\**Flawless* single<sup>69</sup>, being chosen as testimonial for the *Boots No7* cosmetics line, and even having a line of t-shirts with the print "We Should All Be Feminists" made in her honor by Dior fashion designer Maria Grazia Chiuri.<sup>70</sup> Her success as a published author is evident in the scope of translation being made of her works, currently in thirty languages, but her social media presence also counts 822, 532 followers (as of April 11,

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68 Adichie, as quoted by Garner. "Profile of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie" in *Purple Hibiscus*, 313.

69 "Beyoncé Knowles quoted Adichie's TEDxEuston speech 'We Should All Be Feminists' so heavily in a single named *Flawless*, that she named her a contributing artist." Phoebe Parke. "Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the most influential woman in Africa right now?" *CNN*, October 19, 2016, accessed on April 16, 2017, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/19/africa/chimamanda-adichie-influence-africa/index.html>>

70 "More recently Adichie's words appeared on the catwalk at Paris Fashion Week. Italian fashion designer and Dior's first ever female creative director, Maria Grazia Chiuri, had the words 'We should all be feminists' on a T-Shirt in her ready-to-wear SS17 collection. Adichie was also front row at the show, and her speech was included in the soundtrack." Parke, "Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the most influential woman in Africa right now?"

2017) on her Facebook page<sup>71</sup> and, more interestingly still, the success of one of her Facebook posts was such to warrant demand for it to be published as a written work. It was thus that *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* was originally conceived, as shown by the information on the Copyright section before the text: "This is a slightly expanded version of a letter written by the author as a Facebook post on 12 October 2016".<sup>72</sup> A not dissimilar instance had already occurred after her 2013 TEDxEuston speech *We Should All Be Feminists* had become viral: popularity and demand were such that the speech was published as an essay of the same title in 2014. Additionally, the text was deemed so influential in opening a debate on gender-based issues that, after its publication in Swedish in 2015, it was distributed free of charge to all sixteen year-old high school students in Sweden. The Swedish Women's Lobby, responsible for the initiative, made the following statement on their website on December 2 2015:

The Swedish Women's Lobby and Albert Bonniers Förlag together with the UN association of Sweden, LO, The Order of the Teaspoon, Unizon and Gertrud Åström, have distributed the book, in Swedish, as a gift to all second grade high school students in Sweden. Our hope is that *We should all be feminists* will work as a stepping stone for a discussion about gender equality and feminism. [...] The organizations behind the project want to encourage teachers to integrate *We should all be feminists* into their teaching.<sup>73</sup>

Given the overarching reach of Adichie as a literary and feminist celebrity, it is not surprising that a news outlet such as CNN should dedicate one of its 2016 online articles to her caliber as a public figure, what is particularly poignant is that reporter Phoebe Parke chose to title it "Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the most influential woman in Africa right now?"<sup>74</sup> While the title was perhaps meant for shock value, it is nevertheless evident that Adichie herself is conscious of the import social media presence and online presence have in the present era in creating spaces of debate and even in creating public figures. The example hereby provided is directly taken from Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*, where technology and the web 2.0 are seamlessly interwoven in the thick of the plot, as main character Ifemelu builds a fortune of sorts

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71 Data retrieved on April 11, 2017 from Chimamanda Adichie's Facebook page at <<https://www.facebook.com/chimamandaadichie>>

72 Adichie. "Copyright," *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (London: Fourth Estate, Kindle edition, 2017), pos. 17.

73 "We should all be feminists – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's book is distributed as a gift to all Swedish high schools," Sveriges Kvinnolobby, December 2, 2015, accessed on April 12, 2017, <<http://sverigeskvinnolobby.se/en/we-should-all-be-feminists-chimamanda-ngozi-adichies-book-is-distributed-as-a-gift-to-all-swedish-high-schools/>>

74 Parke. "Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the most influential woman in Africa right now?"

through her online blog about race (and gender) issues, *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. An excerpt from the beginning of the novel captures the dynamics of blogging culture and the possibilities it offers:

All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her. SaphicDerrida, one of the most frequent posters, wrote: [...] *You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject.*<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, on the impulse that may lead an individual to communicate through mass social networking platforms:

Blogs were new, unfamiliar to her. But telling Wambui what happened was not satisfying enough; she longed for other listeners, and she longed to hear the stories of others. How many other people chose silence? How many other people had become black in America? How many had felt as though their world was wrapped in gauze? She broke up with Curt a few weeks after that, and she signed on to WordPress, and her blog was born. (*A.*, 366)

Finally, on the possible breadth of reach of a successful blog:

The blog had unveiled itself and shed its milk teeth; by turns, it surprised her, pleased her, left her behind. Its readers increased, by the thousands from all over the world, so quickly that she resisted checking the stats, reluctant to know how many new people had clicked to read her that day [...] E-mails came from readers who wanted to support the blog. Support. That word made the blog even more apart from her, a separate thing that could thrive or not, sometimes without her and sometimes with her. So she set up a link to her PayPal account. (*A.*, 375)

As a further point, Adichie's approach to divulging a feminist message and content appears to be akin to the themes of visibility and accessibility, already mentioned in Keller's research on contemporary young female gender activism. Her contribution to making feminism visible lies not only in her presence as a veritable celebrity, but also in her very public assumption of a feminist label and identity, especially against the odds of the weighty, negative assumptions often tied to women who choose to self-define as such. Her interest in representation may have further ties to recognition feminism or cultural feminism, insofar as her approach to feminism values not only the re-appropriation and rehabilitation of the term 'feminist' but it is also concerned with the rehabilitation of the representation of traditionally, culturally feminine pursuits, as exemplified by her tenth suggestion in *Dear Ijeawele*:

Be deliberate about how you engage with her and her appearance. [...] Don't think that

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<sup>75</sup> Adichie. *Americanah* (London: Fourth Estate, 2013), 5. Henceforth all quotes from the text will be referred to as *A* in parenthesis, in the text, and followed by page numbers.

raising her feminist means forcing her to reject femininity. Feminism and femininity are not mutually exclusive. It is misogynistic to suggest that they are. Sadly, women have learned to be ashamed and apologetic about pursuits that are seen as traditionally female, such as fashion and make-up. But our society does not expect men to feel ashamed of pursuits considered generally male – sports cars, certain professional sports.<sup>76</sup>

Furthermore, Adichie's defense of culturally feminine pursuits and, most importantly, of the freedom to choose an identity for oneself without the societal pressure of gender roles (e.g. "I cannot overstate the power of alternatives. She can counter ideas about static 'gender roles' if she has been empowered by her familiarity with alternatives."<sup>77</sup>) contributes to divulging the notion that feminism is not exclusionary and is thus connected to the theme of accessibility. Indeed, as mentioned in a previous passage, Adichie embodies the contemporary tendency towards a growing separation between academic feminism and more accessible feminism. Her choice to use everyday language and examples to prove the necessity of feminism in modern society reflects her concern with the potentially restricting and alienating nature of academic rules and vocabulary. In addition to the passage previously quoted, her words addressing a controversy regarding a remark of hers on trans and cis women exemplifies her thoughts on "language orthodoxy" (which she ascribes to a portion of the American left in the following statement but which is nevertheless the same core concept she finds constrictive in academic feminism):

What's interesting to me is this is in many ways about language and I think it also illustrates the less pleasant aspects of the American left that there sometimes is this kind of language orthodoxy that you're supposed to participate in, and when you don't there's kind of backlash that gets very personal and very hostile and very closed to debate.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, her engagement with accessibility goes beyond the use of language to explain and divulge feminist issues, it also involves the definition of feminism itself. In *We Should All Be Feminists* (whose title is in itself reminiscent of bell hooks' *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), a call for inclusive, accessible feminism), Adichie states the following:

And when, all those years ago, I looked the word up in the dictionary, it said: *Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes.* [...] More of us should reclaim that word. [...] My own definition of a feminist is a man or a

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76 Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 270-280.

77 Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 303-314.

78 Adichie, as quoted by Yemisi Adegoke. "Chimamanda Adichie: I have nothing to apologize for over transgender women comments," *CNN*, March 23, 2017, accessed on April 17, 2017, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/23/africa/chimamanda-adichie-transgender-row/>>

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.*<sup>79</sup>

Adichie chooses to provide both the dictionary definition of the term as well as her own, exhorting her audience to reclaim the label of feminist for themselves, either to rally around the transnational and trans-cultural potential of the dictionary term or to apply their own definitions. Finally, in *Dear Ijeawele* she identifies the importance of considering feminism as contextual, a set of tools at one's disposal for a given issue. She states, "For me, feminism is always contextual. I don't have a set-in-stone rule; the closest I have to a formula are my two 'Feminist Tools' and I want to share them with you as a starting point."<sup>80</sup> The possibility of viewing feminism as a set of tools rather than solely as a label or an identity one takes on allows individuals to see feminism as something they may use to confront a variety of issues that affect them personally.<sup>81</sup>

### **2.3 The edges of each other's battles<sup>82</sup>**

As a concept, intersectionality concerns themes of multiple identities and, therefore, types of oppression acting simultaneously within and without the individual. While the term was coined in 1989 within the framework of legal argumentation, the idea that a lack of consideration for and a marginalization of non-single-issue identities has characterized the history of social movements, particularly in Western countries, is longstanding. What is considered in the present text is how exclusion and marginalization on the basis of race, class, gender identity and sexual orientation have characterized women's movements in the West from the 19<sup>th</sup> century suffrage movement to the conceptualization of intersectionality by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the present analysis will focus on a definition of intersectionality and of the faulty single-axis psychological framework that renders it necessary and on how intersectionality may be said to be the defining feature of a fourth wave of feminism, especially in relation to the work and engagement of Chimamanda Adichie.

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79 Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 46.

80 Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 41.

81 Seidman also builds a case for the presentation of feminism as a toolkit rather than an identity in her 2013 article *Who Needs Feminism? Lessons from a Digital World*: "By asking "Who needs feminism?" rather than "Who is a feminist?" the participant's statement moves away from a claim of feminism as an identity toward an idea of feminism as a toolkit, a community, a philosophy on which one can draw." Seidman, "Who Needs Feminism? Lessons from a Digital World," 553.

82 A verse from "Outlines", an unpublished poem by Audré Lorde. Lorde. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," *Women in Culture: An Intersectional Anthology for Gender and Women's Studies*, eds. Bonnie Kime Scott, Susan E. Cayleff, Anne Donadey, and Irene Lara (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 23.

Women's movements in Western countries may be said to have been exclusionary on the basis of race, ethnicity, and class (and also sexuality, which, lacking in visibility, was largely overlooked by early activist movements) from the very beginnings of the fight for suffrage in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, it has already been argued in an earlier section that 19<sup>th</sup> century women's movements and the suffragette movement exceedingly focused on the amelioration of the lot of married, white, middle-to-upper-class women and, having gained disenfranchisement at the end of World War I, many women of that category and class perceived their aims to have been fulfilled, thus starting an abeyance in widespread, committed activism. However, in the United States in particular, the debate and tensions that had preceded not only the disenfranchisement of (all) women, but also that of African American men earlier on, sheds light onto the narrow, either/or frames one portion of the American population was forced to define themselves by, i.e. African American women.

African American men had officially been granted voting rights with the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment to the US constitution in 1870, while all women were disenfranchised through the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. The campaign for both had been long and hard-won and, while cooperation between the two groups had even seemed possible at one point in history, it never came into being due to sexist and racist frameworks. Indeed, white men's sexism was rooted to the point of circumventing racial solidarity and choosing black male suffrage as the 'lesser of two evils', whereas white women's racism showed through all too evidently when, upon witnessing that the possibility of black male suffrage would be more likely than universal suffrage, they were able to abandon their African American female allies and appeal to white men on the basis of racial solidarity. Not only was the basis of cooperation and understanding between the two oppressed groups shattered and suspicion between the two fostered, black women were also placed in a complex strait. As stated by bell hooks in her seminal 1980 text, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*:

Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice.<sup>83</sup>

The silencing of African American women's voices arguably swept some of the most radical activists and theorists off the political stage and eclipsed their history, figures

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83 bell hooks. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

such as Sojourner Truth (whose celebrated speech gave hooks' text its title), Mary Church Terrell, and Anna Cooper. It was the latter who, in a 1892 speech, spoke thus:

The colored woman feels that woman's cause is one and universal; and that not till the image of God whether in parian or ebony, is sacred and inviolable; not till race, color, sex, and condition are seen as accidents, and not the substance of life; not till the universal title of humanity to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is conceded to be inalienable to all; not till then is woman's cause won – not the white woman's, nor the black woman's, nor the red woman's, but the cause of every man and of every woman who has writhed silently under a mighty wrong. Woman's wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, and the acquirement of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason, and justice, and love in the government of the nations of earth.<sup>84</sup>

So, too, during the second wave were marginalization and exclusion a common practice in both women's and black rights movements on the basis of, respectively, race and sex. As the 1950s propaganda had effectively manipulated white men and women into the restricting gender roles of sole economic male provider and feminine, passive housewife, the same propaganda had had its effects on the African American community. In a society where racist oppression put black men in the difficult position of aspiring to be the sole providers for their families while not having the same means as white males of achieving high-paying jobs, and where black women were in an analogous double bind of having historically been forced by necessity to join the work forces and simultaneously being pressured by media propaganda to aspire to white female femininity and passivity, black women once again faced an especially difficult scenario. Once more in the words of bell hooks:

Contemporary black women who supported patriarchal dominance placed their submission to the status quo in the context of racial politics and argued that they were willing to accept a subordinate role in relationship to black men for the good of the race. They were indeed a new generation of black females – a generation that had been brainwashed not by black revolutionaries but by white society, by the media, to believe that woman's place was in the home. They were the first generation of black women to face competition with white women for the attention of black men.<sup>85</sup>

Likewise, the newborn women's rights movement in the 1960s appeared to be chiefly preoccupied with the needs of white, middle-class women, whose racial bias either did not allow them to see the different necessities of different groups of women or rendered them all too complacent in letting black women fill in the spot they wished to abandon:

When the women's movement was at its peak and white women were rejecting the role of breeder, burden bearer, and sex object, black women were celebrated for their unique devotion to the task of mothering; for their "innate" ability to bear tremendous

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84 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 193.

85 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 183.

burdens; and for their ever-increasing availability as sex object. We appeared to have been unanimously elected to take up where white women were leaving off. [...] Black women were told that we should find our dignity not in liberation from sexist oppression but in how well we could adjust, adapt, and cope.<sup>86</sup>

The possibilities offered to African American women were again highly restricting: to accept sexist patriarchal order within black rights movements or to accept racist marginalization within the exceedingly white women's rights movement.

Similarly, non-heterosexual women and transgender women faced marginalization within women's rights movements. The exclusion of lesbians and the 'Lavender Menace' has been touched upon in a previous section, while the topic of transgender women and feminism shows a long history of exclusion, if not outright hatred. Based on theories of biological determinism, trans women have faced enormous difficulties in being accepted into women's rights movements on the basis of their not being 'real' women, thus totally identifying the categories of biological sex and gender. Branches of second wave feminism by and large "cast transgender practices, particularly transsexuality, as reactionary patriarchal anachronisms".<sup>87</sup>

The cause for a similar history of marginalization lies in the faulty nature of power structures and social frameworks when made to confront difference, which is either inserted in an oppositional, dominant/subordinate, good/bad binary or tolerated only insofar as it fits into exceedingly narrow frames. The existence of an oppositional binary in Western societies is rendered necessary by dominant economic structures based on profit and competition, which require the creation of a norm for individuals to aspire and conform to, while consequently dehumanizing categories which exist outside what is heralded as 'normal'. Poet and activist Audré Lorde illustrates the contours of such a binary in American society thus:

In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women.<sup>88</sup>

While rejection becomes an institutionalized practice, 'normalcy' is internalized within the individual, resulting in a pattern of distrust and fear towards those outside the dominant norm and a desire to mimic and adhere to the norm by all categories, both

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86 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 6.

87 Susan Stryker. "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question," *Third Wave Feminism*, 61.

88 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 16-17.

those who are a part of the dominant norm and the outsiders. Norms reside and act within the person, as Lorde claims when theorizing a "mythical norm":

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows "that is not me." In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practising.<sup>89</sup>

The principle way in which movements for women's and black rights have operated an identification of difference, for example, has been on the basis of, respectively, sex and race, however not co-existing. As such, the white-dominated women's rights movements are culpable of blindness to issues outside the restriction of categories pertaining to the white middle class and norm (race, class, and sexual identification, traditionally).

Within such a frame of mind, therefore, difference is seen and treated as a single issue and on a single axis of identification, allowing any category for whom difference exists on multiple issues and axes to fall into a gray area of exclusion. As such it is equally jarring and unsurprising to witness second wave feminism compare its struggle to that of African Americans and their oppression, as the underlying conception is that it is just white females comparing their experience to just black males: African American women, at the intersection of the two issues of difference, are absent from the discourse. This analogy between the universal "women" to refer to white women and the universal "black" to refer to the experience of black men as the dominant frames of mind is explored in the text *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. bell hooks also offers a perspective on this single-axis identification, particularly in regards to white feminism appropriating African American struggle, in *Ain't I a Woman*:

Yet such a custom, whether practiced consciously or unconsciously, perpetuates racism in that it assumes that sexuality is the sole self-defining trait of white women and denies their racial identity. White women liberationists did not challenge this sexistracist practice; they continued it. [...] By continuously making this analogy [between "women" and "blacks"] they unwittingly suggest that to them the term "woman" is synonymous with "white women" and the term "black" synonymous with "black men." What this indicates is that there exists in the language of the very movement that is supposedly concerned with eliminating sexist oppression, a sexist-racist attitude towards black women.<sup>90</sup>

The analysis of sexist and racist oppression is thus further complicated, as the dominant

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89 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 18.

90 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 8.

discourses on the two tend to focus on the most privileged members of those categories of activism, white women and black men, respectively.<sup>91</sup>

On a further note, when focusing on the needs of the most privileged members of their groups, women's rights and black liberation movements, despite all notions of radical change, are not interested in subverting the existing frameworks and power structures, but rather in changing them only insofar as they, the privileged members, will have access to the same power structure. As such, male-led black liberation movements reject a power structure based on racism, but co-opt one based on patriarchy, which will maintain power at the hands of men. White-dominated women's liberation movements, conversely, reject a power structure based on sexist oppression only insofar as a racialized structure is still beneficial to them as white women. Once more in bell hooks' words:

The struggle for black liberation and the struggle for women's liberation were seen as inimical largely because black civil rights leaders did not want the white American public to see their demands for full citizenship as synonymous with a radical demand for equality of the sexes. They made black liberation synonymous with gaining full participation in the existing patriarchal nation-state and their demands were for the elimination of racism, not capitalism or patriarchy.<sup>92</sup>

And also:

Although white feminists denounced the white male, calling him an imperialist, capitalist, sexist, racist pig, they made women's liberation synonymous with women obtaining the right to fully participate in the very system they identified as oppressive.<sup>93</sup>

It was on the basis of this underlying theoretical framework and a documented history of exclusion that in 1989 Columbia professor Kimberlé Crenshaw delineated the single-axis framework that dominates discourses on oppression and coined the term 'intersectionality' to express how multiple issues of difference (and thus oppression because of those differences) can at once compose the multifaceted identity of an individual. Her aim was to give visibility to all those figures that, because their experience could not fit into a single, narrow frame of analysis, simply slipped through the cracks of social and especially legal consideration. Her initial scope of examination began within the legal framework and concerned the status of African American women

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91 "[...] the paradigm of sex discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of white women; the model of race discrimination tends to be based on the experiences of the most privileged Blacks." Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, iss. 1 (1989): 151.

92 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 175.

93 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 188.

in cases of workplace discrimination on the basis of sex and race, particularly the *DeGraffinreid v General Motors* case of 1976, in which the plaintiff, a black woman, was denied her demands by the judge on the basis that claiming discrimination on the basis of both sex and race would give her an advantage against any category of people that could only claim one type. Intersectionality, however, goes beyond the scope of legal lawsuits and invests the very way Western societies (and activist groups within these societies) are brought to think about discrimination as a single-issue problem, which consequently denies the experience of people who exist at a crossroads of combined issues of institutionalized discrimination on the basis of race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, class, ethnicity, ability, etc. The analogy crafted by Crenshaw of the busy traffic intersection is particularly poignant:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, Crenshaw states that combined discrimination is not necessarily just a sum of constituent parts, but a form of oppression that is distinct from the experiences of discrimination on the basis of its constituent issues taken singularly, i.e. black women may face discrimination on the basis of sex and race issues, which is not the mere combination of sexism and racism as a white woman or a black man might experience them, but rather targets them specifically as black women. In Crenshaw's terms:

To bring this back to a non-metaphorical level, I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.<sup>95</sup>

Additionally, while intersectionality proposes that, as a society, we look at the convergence of axes of discrimination in such a way as to improve visibility and material conditions for those individuals that exist in that intersection, i.e. a "bottom-up commitment to improve the substantive conditions for those who are victimized by the interplay of numerous factors" (145), the dominant discourses in regards to

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94 Crenshaw. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 149.

95 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex."

discrimination are instead committed to applying rigid theoretical frames which compartmentalize the multiplicity of difference into separate axes of oppression, i.e. a "top-down strategy of using a singular "but for" analysis to ascertain the effects of race or sex."<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, this same trickle-down approach and the "uncritical and disturbing acceptance of dominant ways of thinking about discrimination"<sup>97</sup>, reflected in the prolonged existence of the narrow frameworks hereto illustrated, are the true obstacles to implementing intersectional theory successfully. Indeed, having illustrated the ways in which women's rights movements have so far been culpable of not rejecting the racialized, middle-class, heteronormative status quo in its entirety (but have rather sought methods of co-opting it to the benefit of their white, heterosexual, middle-class components), Audré Lorde's words hold special significance: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."<sup>98</sup> In particular, Lorde's proposal is that not only must the existing frameworks and power structures that codify difference in a superior/inferior, either/or relation to 'normalcy' be rejected, Western societies must learn the value of accepting difference in its full equality. The resulting structure is not based on the needs of power in a profit economy, but rather on relation to equality between individuals:

But our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality. As women, we must root out internalized patterns of oppression within ourselves if we are to move beyond the most superficial aspects of social change. Now we must recognize differences among women who are our equals, neither inferior nor superior, and devise ways to use each others' difference to enrich our visions and our joint struggles. The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference.<sup>99</sup>

On a further note, it has already been suggested that intersectionality may be the key defining feature for the fourth wave in regards to content. In fact, the possibilities opened by new web technologies have not only expanded the scope of internationalism for feminism, they have also created spaces of discussion for individuals who often found themselves excluded from dominant mainstream feminist discourse. The importance of new technologies, therefore, lies once more in broadening the scope of activism, both on an inter-cultural front and on an intra-cultural front, as well, granting increased visibility and representation to diversity and difference. For example, the

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96 "Because the scope of antidiscrimination law is so limited, sex and race discrimination have come to be defined in terms of the experiences of those who are privileged *but for* their racial or sexual characteristics." Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 151.

97 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 150.

98 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 22.

99 Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex."

'call-out' culture created by the Internet, whereby perceived acts of discrimination can be directly challenged even by a single user (often shielded and reassured by the partial or total anonymity guaranteed by the web) has enabled the birth of a subculture based on 'privilege-checking'<sup>100</sup>, i.e. the practice of reminding oneself and other individuals that one must be aware of one's own privilege in society before claiming to speak universally or for oppressed groups in social justice platforms. While this linguistic strategy primarily serves to raise awareness on how women's rights discourse remains still mostly dominated by middle-class, straight, white women, Munro claims it to be a tool for making diversity more visible as well:

In an effort to draw attention to these axes of difference, contemporary feminists advocate several tactics, including the much-maligned practice of 'privilege-checking'. As a tactic, privilege-checking is about reminding someone that they cannot and should not speak for others. [...] The phrase 'check your privilege' was born on the internet, and young activists who grew up communicating via internet chat rooms appear to have considerably less trouble with the phrase than older feminists.<sup>101</sup>

Moreover, the enduring resonance of the previously illustrated #SayHerName campaign is particularly indicative of the heightened visibility intersectional theory may nowadays enjoy within women's rights movements, as opposed to its roots at the onset of the third wave, especially in consideration of the fact that the founder of the campaign is Kimberlé Crenshaw herself (within the frame of the AAPF).

Finally, as far as the multiplicity of identity is concerned, it has already been stated that Chimamanda Adichie has a cross-cultural status, which also entails her explicit acceptance of the identity of blackness in American society. While Adichie compiles her identities as Nigerian, Igbo, black, and female, her works are likewise permeated with intersections of difference and diversity. In point of fact, whenever she narrates of men or women being displaced in cultures different from their own, of an entire people being targeted and persecuted for their ethnicity, of non-white women living in a racialized, patriarchal society, or of non-heterosexual men or women of color simply existing within that same homophobic societal framework, the axes of oppression inevitably intersect. The intersectional perspective is a necessary frame to understand the import of Adichie's work for the literary mainstream, insofar as diversity is present as a main

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100On the ties between self-identification as an intersectional feminist and the practice of privilege-checking in the fourth wave, Cochrane states: "Many of those who describe themselves as intersectional feminists talk about checking their privilege – recognising where they stand in social power structures and ensuring they advocate and make space for those who are marginalised." Cochrane, *All the Rebel Women*, pos. 939.

101Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" 24-25.

recurring theme. For this purpose, the present text will analyze four of her texts precisely through an intersectional lens in a future chapter. Meanwhile, Adichie provides an example of the complexity of the axes of oppression and power structures based on race in the US in *Americanah*, where the character Ifemelu illustrates the largely demeaning concept of "oppression olympics", often used to oversimplify the discourse on racial discrimination by denying that different minorities are oppressed in different ways and to varying degrees, and denouncing all claims to the contrary as lamentations or grabs for attention. In the passage entitled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What do WASPs Aspire To?", ascribed to the character's blog, Ifemelu types:

"Oppression olympics" is what smart liberal Americans say, to make you feel stupid and to make you shut up. But there IS an oppression olympics going on. American racial minorities – blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Jews – all get shit from white folks, different kinds of shit, but shit still. Each secretly believes that it gets the worst shit. So, no, there is no United League of the Oppressed. However, all the others think they're better than blacks because, well, they're not black. [...] So whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course [...] but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. [...] So if everyone in America aspires to be WASPs, then what do WASPs aspire to? Does anyone know? (*A*, 252-253)

Conversely, when Adichie's texts are more closely focused on Nigerian society, intersecting identities do not generally involve racialized power structures, but rather ethnicity, religion, social class, and, of course, gender.

Furthermore, Adichie's approach to difference in general is that of acceptance and challenge to the concept of 'normalcy', in stark opposition to the idea of colorblind theory, for example, which, with specific regards to race, proposes an end to discrimination by simply ignoring the existence of difference. By way of definition, author Janet Ward Schofield states the following:

People in favor of colorblind approaches to policy argue that taking cognizance of group membership in decision making is illegitimate because it is likely to lead either to discrimination against minority groups or to reverse discrimination in their favor. [...] Yet others (Barrett & George, 2005; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Guinier & Torres, 2002; Levin, 2003) argue that such an approach is the antithesis of fairness – that it is akin to a race between a well-nourished and well-trained athlete for whom most of the spectators are rooting and an individual who has just been released from an unjust prison term during which food was sparse and opportunities for exercise were denied.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup>Janet Ward Schofield. "The Colorblind Perspective in School: Causes and Consequences," *Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives*, eds. James A. Banks, Cherry A. McGee Banks (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 260.

Adichie's stance differs entirely insofar as she argues a re-conceptualization of the idea of normalcy itself: difference and diversity cannot be merely tolerated or not taken into account, they must become normal and this must be specifically taught to children from a young age. Her fifteenth suggestion in *Dear Ijeawele* focuses precisely on educating children to the normalization of difference:

Teach her about difference. Make difference ordinary. Make difference normal. Teach her not to attach value to difference. And the reason for this is not to be fair or to be nice but merely to be human and practical. Because difference is the reality of our world. And by teaching her about difference, you are equipping her to survive in a diverse world. [...] Teach her never to universalize her own standards or experiences. Teach her that her standards are for her alone, and not for other people. This is the only necessary form of humility: the realization that difference is normal.<sup>103</sup>

Once a society's perspective becomes that of diversity as normalcy, a bottom-up strategy of intersectionality such as the one proposed by Crenshaw has a higher possibility of coming into being, because the restricting social and legal frameworks that were based on the experiences of just the privileged members of a given category would no longer hold a specific value and would, thus, have no reason to exist as such. Therefore, Adichie's proposed solution to the issue raised by intersectional theory does not in essence differ from Crenshaw's, hooks' or Lorde's, i.e. it is the very structures with which we codify and relate to difference that must change radically.

## ***2.4 Mothers or Sisters: the African Variant***

The present section is concerned with an issue of terminology regarding 'feminism' in relation to the African experience. More precisely, the conception of feminism as an essentially Western product, indifferent to and not reflective of the needs of Third World communities, will be addressed, alongside the theorization of different terminologies and labels to encapsulate gender activism on the African continent. In addition, Chimamanda Adichie's views on the different currents of women's rights activism and her relation to African variants will be illustrated.

The long and exclusionary history of women's rights activism in the West, as well as the tendency to universalize white women's experience as the standard for gender activism worldwide, have amply been discussed in the preceding sections. It is precisely on the basis of this marginalizing framework that, according to author Fatima Adamu, two types of attitudes in regards to feminism have developed in the African context, one

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103Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 385-395.

advocating for inclusive variants to Western feminism, even and especially in terms of language, and the other denouncing feminism as entirely invalid to the African experience. Adamu identifies the two attitudes thus:

The first one, although critical of mainstream feminism for excluding the race, history and class issue, tends to view feminism in a positive and constructive light, whereas the second dismisses feminism as a Western, imperialist concept. [...] Those favoring the first approach find it satisfactory to broaden the Western definition of feminism and to make it relevant to the struggle of Africa and African women by deconstructing the concept.<sup>104</sup>

It is so that the scope and priorities of traditionally Western feminism have been morphed to be inclusive of issues that are perceived by scholars as more relevant to the realities on the African continent. As such, the idea that gender activism should address the specific needs of Third World communities becomes central to the discourse, as exemplified in the words of Nigerian writer and author of *Joys of Motherhood* and *Destination Biafra*, Buchi Emecheta:

I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, 'Okay, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting.' That is my brand of feminism.<sup>105</sup>

Other concerns include the focalization on motherhood instead of sisterhood as the defining, unifying feature of African feminisms, with theorist Oyeronke Oyewumi defending the idea that sisterhood is an essentially Western concept that does not pertain to non-white cultures. Indeed, motherhood is a common conceptual and linguistic framework for all the African variants which will be taken into consideration in this section, the underlying notion being that, while sisterhood pertains to the language of mainstream Western feminism, motherhood (and, thus, also the centrality of children) relates more closely to the African experience of gender activism. A further defining issue perceived to be in opposition to Western feminism is the refusal to create separatism from men. In point of fact, Pinke Mekgwe cites author Filomina Chioma Steady's engagement in the involvement of men in African variants of feminism:

One sphere that has increasingly held the attention of theorists like Steady has been the question of the involvement of men. The rationale is that, if African feminism is to succeed as a humane reformation project, it cannot accept separatism from the opposite sex. Eschewing male exclusion then, becomes one defining feature of African

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104Fatima Adamu. "Women's Struggle and the Politics of Difference in Nigeria," *gender.politik.online*, February 2006, accessed on March 25, 2017, <[http://www.gender-politik-online.De/\(13.04.2011\)>](http://www.gender-politik-online.De/(13.04.2011)>)

105Buchi Emecheta, as quoted by Pinke Mekgwe. "Theorizing African Feminism(s): the 'Colonial' Question," *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/ Revue Africaine de Philosophie* XX, no. 1-2 (2006): 17.

feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualized in the west.<sup>106</sup>

On the basis of this common framework and set of issues, we may identify three main variants to Western feminism: the co-opting of Alice Walker's 'womanism' in the African context, 'motherism', and 'stiwanism'. In the first case, the name explicitly refers to the concept Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, defined for the first time in her 1983 work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* as:

A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counter-balance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "It wouldn't be the first time." [...] Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.<sup>107</sup>

While the term womanism has been embraced by African writers such as Emecheta or Nigerian literary critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, one of the concerns that remains with the concept of womanism is that it nevertheless stems from the African American context and is, once more, a name that arises from outside the African experience. The second approach to an African variant for feminism, motherism, was theorized by Nigerian author Catherine Obianuju Acholonu in her 1995 text of the same name, *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. As a concept, motherism emphasizes not only the centrality of motherhood to the African woman's experience, but also the importance of considering planet Earth as a mother and committing to its survival through cooperation. Finally, stiwanism (short for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) is a term coined by Nigerian author Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie in her 1994 text *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, which advocates the following ideas:

[...] Ogundipe-Leslie elaborates on the premise of African feminism that: (1) feminism needs not be in opposition to men, (2) women need not neglect their biological roles, (3) African women idealise motherhood and claim it to be a strength having a special manifestation in Africa, (4) the total configuration of the women's condition should be addressed rather than being obsessed with sexual issues, (5) certain aspects of women's reproductive rights take priority over others, (6) the women's condition in Africa needs to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of their society involving men and children, and (7) any women's ideology has to be developed in the

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106Mekgwe, "Theorizing African Feminism(s)," 16.

107Alice Walker. "Womanist," *Women in Culture: An Intersectional Anthology for Gender and Women's Studies*, 23-24.

context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the contemporary Africa.<sup>108</sup>

Further possible African variants for gender activism include, among others, femalism, theorized by Chioma Opara, Clenora Hudson-Weems' definition of 'Africana womanism', and Obioma Nnaemeka's nego-feminism or 'no ego feminism', rooted in a culture of negotiation and compromise.

With regards to Adamu's definition of the two main attitudes towards mainstream feminism in Africa, Chimamanda Adichie's stance may be said to be oppositional to both. First of all, her response to the concept that feminism is in itself a Western, imperialist concept, which, therefore, has no place in Africa, is coherent with that of other scholars (such as Adamu herself, for example) insofar as her claim is that women's struggle for rights and activism on the basis of gender has existed in Africa since long before any contact with Western feminism came into being. Adichie's encounter with dismissal of feminism as 'un-African' is illustrated in *We Should All Be Feminists*:

Then an academic, a Nigerian woman, told me that feminism was not our culture, that feminism was un-African, and I was only calling myself a feminist because I had been influenced by Western books. (Which amused me, because much of my early reading was decidedly unfeminist: I must have read every single Mills & Boon romance published before I was sixteen. And each time I try to read those books called 'classic feminist texts', I get bored, and I struggle to finish them.)<sup>109</sup>

In a later passage of the same speech/essay she provides a direct example of her belief that feminism as a term may be Western in nature, but the concept it expresses is decidedly not "un-African":

My great-grandmother, from the stories I've heard, was a feminist. She ran away from the house of the man she did not want to marry and married the man of her choice. She refused, protested, spoke up whenever she felt she was being deprived of land and access because she was female. She did not know that word *feminist*. But it doesn't mean she wasn't one.<sup>110</sup>

A further example to illustrate Adichie's statement may be taken directly from colonial Nigerian history of the 1920s, i.e. the Women's War or Aba Women's Riots. The Women's War consisted of a mass protest in 1929, when thousands of mostly Igbo women marched into the town of Oloko to demonstrate against the restrictions enacted by the Warrant Chiefs against female participation in the government. Another instance in Nigeria involves the Abeokuta women's movement of the 1930s, in which the women were able to dethrone the feudal lord of Abeokuta, is mentioned by Wole Soyinka

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108Adamu, "Women's Struggle and the Politics of Difference in Nigeria."

109Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 8.

110Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 46.

(whose aunt was among the protesters) in *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*:

A casual involvement—at a most impressionable age—with the Abẹ̀òkúta women's movement, narrated in *AKÉ*, may have prepared the soil. That began in the late nineteen-thirties when the women, led by my aunt, the formidable Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, rose against unjust taxes and chased the feudal lord, the Alák, of Abẹ̀òkúta, from his throne.<sup>111</sup>

Secondly, Adichie's stance in regards to African variants of feminism such as womanism or motherism, for example, is not aligned with many of the ideas advocated therein. As a matter of fact, Adichie is critical of the emphasis on motherhood found within these movements, which she finds is not suited to her definition of gender activism. In her own words:

I don't want to be flippant about the reason for the discomfort that black women feel [in regards to self-identifying as feminists], but I also want to say that I felt discomfort about what became the alternative words. Like, womanism I was uncomfortable with because it sort of made me think of some sort of, some motherly, mystical thing that I just thought, [...] "Not my thing."<sup>112</sup>

While Adichie is considerate of the sentiment and the material reasons that may bring many non-white women to not identify within traditional, mainstream feminism, her approach is nevertheless one of accessibility and possible universality of the term 'feminism', given the simplicity and applicability of its dictionary definition. Adichie strongly defends diversity and the need to address the specific demands of specific communities of women, however her belief is that of diversity within one same, basic concept to rally behind, as exemplified further by her words to Atria:

Many women, I think, who agree with the sentiment, [...] have a problem with the word – and I think it's just easier to have a word around which to rally, in then talking about the diversity within feminism. Because I think of feminisms, really. I think there's a fundamental starting point, which is you have to agree in the equality of men and women.<sup>113</sup>

In conclusion, the present chapter has provided an account of the history of feminism as a movement and an overview of intersectionality as a lens for the analysis of Adichie's work and engagement. In the following chapter, postcolonialism and a specifically feminist postcolonial perspective will be examined to complete the theoretical framework for the interpretation of Adichie's specific feminist engagement.

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111 Wole Soyinka. *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (Ibadan: Bookcraft, Kindle edition, 2006), pos. 895.

112 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria", 10:28.

113 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria", 11:06.

### 3. POSTCOLONIALISM AND FEMINISM

#### *3.1 Issues of Post-colonialism*

While Chimamanda Adichie's status as an internationalized, cross-cultural figure has been previously mentioned, her stance as a postcolonial writer and, more specifically, a writer engaged with the enduring legacy of colonialism is yet to be explored. The present chapter aims to illustrate how postcolonialism and a feminist perspective on postcolonialism combine to inform Adichie's work. Correspondingly, this section will provide an attempt at a definition of the nature and scope of postcolonial studies, as well as illustrating three issues raised by postcolonialism, which may be found in Adichie's writings and speeches, i.e. the representation of the (post) colonial 'Other' in fiction as reductive and hierarchical, the inferiority complex instilled within the colonial subject, and the concept of mimicry.

The term 'postcolonial' encompasses a multitude of significations and a wide scope of study, starting from etymology itself, which intuitively leads to the conception that postcolonialism (or 'post-colonialism') engages with the historical consequences of colonialism. In terms of geography, what has come to be known as the Third World delineates the space of postcolonialism, and the countries which this denomination comprises are to be identified as the ex-colonies of the Western empires. The label 'Third World' was determined as a consequence of the 1955 Bandung Conference, where 29 African and Asian countries declared themselves to be non-aligned to either the US or the Soviet front. Robert Young highlights the momentous importance of the Bandung Conference by identifying it as "the origin of postcolonialism as a self-conscious political philosophy"<sup>1</sup> and presents the notion of a 'Third World' thus:

This third world is the postcolonial world. The term 'third world' was originally invented on the model of the Third Estate of the French Revolution. The world was divided according to the two major political systems, capitalism and socialism, and these were the first and second worlds. The third world was made up of what was left over: the 'non-aligned' nations, the new independent nations that had formerly made up the colonies of the imperial powers. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, 29 mostly newly independent African and Asian countries, including Egypt, Ghana, India, and Indonesia, initiated what became known as the non-aligned movement.<sup>2</sup>

As a political philosophy and activist practice, therefore, postcolonialism is primarily engaged in contesting the dominant Western structures of power, which continue to

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1 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 19.

2 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 16.

place Third World countries in a position of social, political, and economic inequality and dependency (the latter is a phenomenon often referred to as 'neocolonialism'). The chief vehicle through which this project is carried out is by shifting the traditional paradigm of knowledge (which implies that all 'legitimate' knowledge must inherently be produced in the West by Westerners) so as to give voice to the colonial Other, transforming them into subject and creator of knowledge. Correspondingly, as a body of literature, postcolonialism comprises a vast area of study, ranging from psychiatry, to anthropology, sociology, history, literature (fiction and non-fiction), etc. As such, postcolonial studies are far from a unified body of theory and research, but are rather composed of a diverse set of issues which find common ground in their challenge to dominant discourses and structures of the West. A possible metaphor for the interdisciplinary nature of postcolonial studies is that of 'bricolage' (proposed by Shaul Bassi and Andrea Sirotti in their 2010 introduction to postcolonial studies, *Gli studi post coloniali*), which is able to convey the sense of composition and re-composition of items, tools, and concepts originating from multiple fields of study and experience within a common framework and purpose.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, Robert Young, in *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003), proposes the model of cinematic 'montage' as a possible tool for the systematic analysis of postcolonialism so as to "juxtapose perspectives and times against one another, seeking to generate a creative set of relations between them".<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, many of the earliest and seminal texts in the field of postcolonial studies reflect the composite nature ascribed to postcolonialism, insofar as they not only refer to multiple fields of study but they also contain a strong autobiographical element on the part of their authors, such as Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor (both theoreticians of *négritude*). One particularly poignant example is that of Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist from Martinique who operated in Algeria during French colonialism and was thus able to analyze through case study, as well as his own experience, the psychological effects of colonial domination on the colonized subject. His 1952 *Peau noire, masques blancs*, for example, explores the contradictory desire within the colonial subject, specifically

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3 "Neither just history, nor literature, nor literary criticism, anthropology, philosophy or psychology, postcolonial studies are a form of interdisciplinary "bricolage", which appropriates, transforming them, tools and concepts from a variety of fields, locating its origin in the political battles for decolonization and in the experience of the colonized subject." (Translation mine) Shaul Bassi, Andrea Sirotti. "Introduzione," *Gli studi post coloniali*, eds. Shaul Bassi, Andrea Sirotti (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2010), 8.

4 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 6.

the black Martinican, and the complex of inferiority created by the colonial power structure and internalized by a colonized people. Furthermore, Edward Said's 1978 *Orientalism*, the text which is said to have given postcolonial studies a recognizable form and status<sup>5</sup>, is strongly informed by the philosophy of Michel Foucault. In this study, Said, himself a Palestinian-born, naturalized American citizen, examines Western representation of the East and Middle-East in a variety of communicative genres, fictional and purportedly documentaristic, to illustrate how a stereotypical representation based entirely on Western assumptions regarding Eastern countries fostered and abetted colonial enterprise. In the 1980s the theoretical 'canon' of postcolonial studies was completed with the publication of studies by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, both influenced by the philosophical current of poststructuralism and the works of Jacques Derrida. Homi Bhabha, Indian-born and naturalized as a US citizen, is responsible for the introduction of the concepts such as of 'hybridity' and, through his 1984 essay *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, of 'mimicry', a possibly disruptive tool at the hands of the colonial subject which will be expanded upon in a further passage. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, also Indian-born and a naturalized US citizen, further expanded the scope of her postcolonial analysis to include feminism and, more specifically, the relation between Western and Third World feminisms and activism.<sup>6</sup> In her 1988 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, for example, Spivak proposes the idea that no production of knowledge is innocent insofar as it is produced to serve an interest, specifically Western production of knowledge and research into the cultural Other, i.e. Third World countries, is carried out to cater to Western interests.

In consideration of the fact that postcolonialism is generally concerned with the politics of the 'subaltern', i.e. the oppressed in Gramscian terms, the knowledge and literatures produced under the name of 'postcolonial' comprise this 'subaltern knowledge', which protests dominant paradigms to give voice to the oppressed. In Young's words, "Postcolonialism, or tricontinentalism, is a general name for these

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5 "Following a widely accepted reconstruction, postcolonial studies acquire their recognizability and status with the appearance of a seminal text, *Orientalism* by Edward Said." (Translation mine) Bassi, Sirotti, "Introduzione," 15.

6 "Spivak, in particular, greatly focuses her attention on both the issues relating to feminism (especially the tense interchange between the demands of western feminism and those made by Third World women) and those relating to pedagogy, highlighting how postcolonial studies find their framework within a sort of "pedagogic machine", an institutional frame which must always be kept in mind." (Translation mine) Bassi, Sirotti, "Introduzione," 24.

insurgent knowledges that come from the subaltern, the dispossessed, and seek to change the terms and values under which we all live".<sup>7</sup> With specific regards to literary production, postcolonial literature had been initially defined as the writings of colonial subjects in the language of the colonizer<sup>8</sup>, however the breadth of the definition may now be amplified so as to include writings in indigenous, pidgin or creole languages which nevertheless challenge the Western cultural paradigm.

Consequently, in light of this definition, Chimamanda Adichie is a postcolonial author even solely in virtue of her being a member of an ex-colony, Nigeria, who writes in English, the language of the colonizer. The identification of Adichie as postcolonial goes beyond such a simple definition, however, insofar as she not only incarnates the principle of 'translation' (her cultural mobility puts her in the position of continuous negotiation with difference, for example), she also explicitly engages with the politics of colonialism and its consequences. In her own words, the writing of the novel *Purple Hibiscus* was born of a deliberate desire to confront the experience and inheritance of colonialism: "I wanted to write about colonialism, which I think every African writer does without meaning to. The way we are is very much the result of colonialism – the fact that I think in English, for example".<sup>9</sup> Thinking in English instead of Igbo, ideally her native tongue, is another marker of the specific kind of 'translation', in linguistic terms especially, that is enacted within the people of an ex-colony. Indeed, in regards of the depth of her knowledge of Igbo, Adichie states:

I don't know many proverbs, so [...] I admire people who do, because it shows a kind of, a depth in your knowledge of the language that I really don't have. My father has that. [...] When my father speaks Igbo, it's very literary: his sentences are full of metaphors and nothing is ever said directly. And I'm just full of admiration for this but my generation, we don't really have that and, because my language of education in Nigeria was entirely English, I can't even make an intellectual argument in Igbo. So, I can gossip in Igbo and I can make fun and laugh and [...] tease, but to say something sort of profound, such as it might be? I can't.<sup>10</sup>

In regards to her status as a cross-cultural figure, Adichie's stance on the importance of gaining perspective through distance is reminiscent of Said's argumentation on the same

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7 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 20.

8 Such was the identification provided in *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. On the need to broaden the scope of postcolonial literature: "For example, if, some twenty years ago, *The Empire Writes Back* could identify postcolonial literature as what was being written by the colonized in the language of the colonizer, nowadays a comparative series cannot afford to not confront the literature being written in non-European languages [...]" Bassi, Sirotti, "Introduzione," 31.

9 Garner, "About the Author", 313.

10 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 13:58.

topic. In *Orientalism*, Said asserted the following:

The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment *and* generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance.<sup>11</sup>

Correspondingly, Adichie claims that it was precisely her experience away from Nigeria which opened her eyes to the capillarity and intersection of phenomena such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In her own words:

The question of identity and identities: race, gender, class, home, all of those things – in many ways, things I became interested in because I left home. I think, if I hadn't left home, I think my concerns would be different. But, yeah, the idea of what different categories mean. Distance is always a good thing, I think, for a writer, distance from the subject.<sup>12</sup>

Adichie's engagement with the legacy of colonialism transpires through a set of issues visible in her work and of which the present text will illustrate three, the first being the issue of Western representation of the African continent and its relations to the underlying power structure. It was Edward Said who in 1978 elaborated a theory on the link between cultural and academic representation and political enterprise and structure. In *Orientalism*, Said used Foucault's definition of discourse to delineate the scope of what he labeled Orientalism, i.e. the European (and American) paradigm of representation of the Far and Middle East. According to Said, Orientalism has three identifiable meanings, the first being Orientalism as a means for Europe of coming to terms with the 'Orient' as a place of difference through which Europe was able to build an image of its own identity. As Said states:

Unlike the Americans, the French and the British – less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss – have had a long tradition of what I shall be calling *Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.<sup>13</sup>

Said's proposed second meaning is broad, identifying Orientalism as a style of thought which encompasses a vast field of literary pursuits dealing with the 'Orient' and with the

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11 Edward W. Said. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 259.

12 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 10:59.

13 Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.

common ground of a distinction between 'Occident' (which exists solely in relation to its Other) and 'Orient'. Said elaborates thus:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident". Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind", destiny, and so on.(2-3)

The third meaning of Orientalism relates more closely to the exchange between academic and general imaginative cultural representations of the 'Orient' in creating a framework akin and mutually beneficial to the European enterprise of political domination of the East. In Said's words:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.(3)

The strategy through which the reality of Eastern countries and their inhabitants (Said focuses primarily on the Middle East as he claims sufficient literary material may be found to grant it its own status among Western representations of the East) is restructured to suit the ideological needs of the West is through a representation that is not only standardized on a series of tropes (e.g. the idea of an Eastern licentious approach to sexuality is recognizable as far back as classical Greek accounts of Persian uses and lifestyles), it is also filtered through the eyes of the Western spectator or commentator with the Eastern individual always as the object of a gaze which does not seek his or her consent before applying assumptions and significations. The form representation thus often takes is that of the 'Oriental' society as placed at an earlier stage of civilization, inhabited by a people defined as either childlike or animalistic (or both), and, therefore, incapable of self-governing and in need of the West's control. Said identifies the 'Orient' evoked in European representations as "almost a European invention, [which] had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences"(1).

In a similar fashion, with regards to the colonial experience in Africa, V.Y. Mudimbe locates colonialism as the responsible force in creating the dichotomies and oppositions which enabled a Western reductionist view of the continent:

Because of the colonializing structure, a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a great number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: traditional versus modern; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies. In Africa a great deal of attention is generally given to the evolution implied and promised by the passage from the former paradigms to the latter.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, in regards to how colonialism was able to invent and use these dichotomies to further and justify its exploitative purposes, Mudimbe also criticizes the literary representations surrounding the colonial enterprise:

Theories of colonial expansion and discourses on African primitiveness emphasize a historicity and the promotion of a particular model of history. In other words, Mungo Park's *Journal of a Mission* (1815) or Richard and John Lander's report (1838) essentially address the same issues that R. F. Burton, V. L. Cameron, H. M. Stanley, and F. D. Lugard spelled out in different words, and on which twentieth-century anthropology focuses. This is the discrepancy between "civilization" and "Christianity" on the one hand, "primitiveness" and "paganism" on the other, and the means of "evolution" or "conversion" from the first stage to the second. [...] What they propose is an ideological explanation for forcing Africans into a new historical dimension. [...] They speak about neither Africa nor Africans, but rather justify the process of inventing and conquering a continent and naming its "primitiveness" or "disorder," as well as the subsequent means of its exploitation and methods for its "regeneration."<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Adichie also shifts the focus on Western discourse regarding the African continent and draws attention to the very dichotomies expressed by Mudimbe, as well as existence of a paradigm similar for all intents and purposes to Said's Orientalism. In the introduction to the present text, Adichie's words on the human susceptibility to stories and the incipient risk of a dominant story becoming the only story were already introduced, as well as the sense of loss and personal displacement a non-white Third World individual may feel in being steadily marginalized, excluded or misrepresented in dominant, mainstream Western literature and media. Her claim is that the dominant Western discourse in regards to Africa is by and large reductive and dehumanizing towards its inhabitants, as exemplified in the following passage:

If I had not grown up in Nigeria and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.<sup>16</sup>

Adichie defines this standardized representation as the 'single story' the West holds of Africa and ascribes its origin to Western literature about Africa. This single story

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14 V.Y. Mudimbe. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 4.

15 Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 20.

16 "The danger of a single story", 6:04.

continuously and repeatedly represented Africa as a place of negatives and of difference in comparison to the West, the consequences of which are still active today in Western imagination and assumptions about the continent, even centuries after the beginnings of the slave trade and colonial enterprise. In *The Danger of a Single Story*, for example, Adichie recalls the anecdote of her college roommate in the US being surprised at her use of the English language, her knowledge of basic technology, home appliances, and Western media. In short, the roommate was surprised at Adichie's being a person of her same century, with her same means and dignity. Such is the power of reducing a continent to a single story of hunger and strife in the minds of often well-meaning Western individuals:

What struck me was this: she had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position towards me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa, a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.<sup>17</sup>

The single story of Africa feeds on stereotypes similar to those presented by Said insofar as the local populations are presented as incapable of self-rule and require the intervention of white saviors. According to Adichie, this is particularly true of the present structure of humanitarian aid programs, which often draw heavily on the imagery of Africa as a place of strife and death and may even lead to the reinforcement of a politics of dependency of Third World nations from the West. Adichie confronts Western interest in humanitarian aid as 'fashionable' thus:

A different manifestation of stereotypes is the present sexiness and hipness of Africa in the Western media. Africa has for the past two years or so been very fashionable in the United States and Europe, and this new "afro-fashion" is based in part on the stereotype of the poor starving African in need of salvation by the West. So we have celebrities not only adopting babies but recommending that baby adoption is the way to save Africa. And we have tons of people who go to Africa to show us how much they care and who take pictures with starving African babies, and that sort of thing. Now, I don't want to appear facile about this issue. I recognize that there are huge problems in my continent, and I certainly want them fixed, and I believe that aid can be useful – although I do have trouble with the idea of adoption or distributing bags of grain as the solution. I would rather that we look at aid in ways that do not create dependency, that we start to think of aid not merely as bags of grain but as infrastructure and trade.<sup>18</sup>

Adichie's doubtfulness in regards to the underlying mechanism of representation lurking beneath the politics of humanitarian aid also extends to popular media platforms and the kind of representation they also foster, as exemplified by her thoughts on African

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17 "The danger of a single story", 4:50.

18 Adichie. "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 44.

presence in TED speeches. In this regard, she states the following:

I also remember thinking that, in the audience, because the TED enterprise – at the time, at least – was one in which all the African stories fit a certain mold. So, it was sort of the African person who had been a child soldier, the African person who had been given aid to build a well in Botswana or something. And I realized, standing there, I didn't fit, I didn't fit the way Africa had been presented at those conferences and I remember feeling an almost tactile sense of resistance in the beginning, because I think they were looking at me like, "You're supposed to be asking us to help you, but you're telling us to rethink how we think."<sup>19</sup>

The structure underpinning the single story of Africa is thus one of power, much like Said's theorization of Orientalism as a concomitant relationship between the production of discourse and culture and the political foundations of the colonial enterprise. Likewise, Adichie stresses the link between the single story and power, how by showing "a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, that is what they become".<sup>20</sup> Power is enacted in representation when one story is made to become the definitive story of a people:

It is impossible to talk about the single story without talking about power. There is a word, an Igbo word, that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world and it is *nkali*. It's a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another". Like our economic and political world, stories too are defined by the principle of *nkali*. How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. (9:38)

A hierarchical power structure is also implicit in the problematic issue of African authenticity in literature in the eyes of Western society and particularly among specialists and scholars. Adichie laments the peculiarity of the standard for African authenticity by recalling an episode surrounding the publication of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which an American professor had criticized on the basis of it not being authentically African. His definition of authenticity proved to draw heavily from the same stereotypes that constitute the single story of Africa: in a story about the Nigerian middle class, the professor could see no authenticity because it did not fit with the Western imagery of poverty-stricken Africa. Adichie elaborates on the anecdote in the following excerpt:

After my first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was published, a professor at John Hopkins informed me that it was not authentically African. My characters were educated and middle class. They drove cars. They were not starving. Therefore, they were not authentically African. [...] I do not accept the idea of monolithic authenticity. To insist that there is one thing that is authentically African is to diminish the African

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19 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria", 14:13.

20 "The danger of a single story", 9:29.

experience.<sup>21</sup>

The structure beneath this monolithic idea of authenticity is reductionist and it is heavily based on power, insofar as it consciously or unconsciously carries a political judgment on the subjects and spaces of the work of literature. It is precisely this that Adichie contests when she expresses her doubts about those who hail a text which must necessarily be ambivalent, if not openly derogatory, in regards to the African continent as a great work of art. In her own words:

There are people who sort of have this belief [that] if somebody writes a book that in its spirit is derogatory to an entire continent, somehow it's honest. I think it's a very wrong reading to say that because something supports your own political prejudices, then somehow it's great literature. I don't think that's true.<sup>22</sup>

A second issue of relevance within the framework of postcolonialism that influences Adichie's work is that of the contradictory nature of desire within the person of the colonial subject. Indeed, while the foundation of postcolonial studies has been so far illustrated as involved in issues surrounding the subversion of the dominant structures of knowledge and power, another important phenomenon that has been investigated by postcolonialism is the inferiority complex of the colonial subject or, in other terms, the aspiration to whiteness and the portrayal of whiteness as aspirational. Frantz Fanon elaborated an examination of this phenomenon, through case study, observation, and personal experience, in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, concentrating the scope of his reach to the 'Antillean black' and the 'black Martinican'. In his study, Fanon supports the idea of a feeling of alienation produced in the black man as an effect of colonialism, a "psychoexistential complex"<sup>23</sup> which leads the black man to aspire to the symbolic markers of whiteness, such as Western culture and the colonizer's language, without ever fully coming to possess whiteness itself (which Homi Bhabha would later identify within the topic of mimicry as an 'almost the same, but not quite'). In his initial analysis, Fanon postulates the existence of two facts, which he ascribes to a dual narcissism:

The white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man is sealed in his blackness. [...] There is a fact: White men consider themselves superior to black men. There is another fact: Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect.(3)

Fanon states that a racialized structure such as colonial society privileges assimilation to

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21 Adichie. "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran experience", 48.

22 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 10:28.

23 Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 5.

Western norms as desirable in order to access society, therefore the narrow window of opportunity for the colonial subject to attempt assimilation passes necessarily through language, and specifically mastery of the colonizer's language. This is all the more evident when considering the educational systems implanted in colonies revolved entirely around a Western education in a European language. In regards to the power of language, Fanon states:

A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. [...] Every colonized – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.(9)

However, even in the case of a complete mastery of the language, the colonial subject who does happen to travel to the mother country is doomed to discover that assimilation does not pass solely through symbolic markers and that, indeed, assimilation is not truly possible, it is rejected by the people of the mother country themselves. One such way this transpires through language is inscribed in two attitudes the white man holds towards the black man that Fanon amply describes, the first being patronizing the black man by talking to him as if he had the comprehension skills of a child and the second being speaking to the black man directly in pidgin. Both attitudes denote a fixed mental representation of the Other within white people. Fanon elaborates the implicit consequences in 'talking down' to people of color in the following passage:

I am not at all exaggerating: A white man addressing a Negro behaves exactly like an adult with a child and starts smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening. It is not one white man I have watched, but hundreds; and I have not limited my investigation to any one class but, if I may claim an essentially objective position, I have made a point of observing such behavior in physicians, policemen, employers. [...] Talking to Negroes in this way gets down to their level, it puts them at ease, it is an effort to make them understand us, it reassures them...(19-20)

Likewise, the underlying message in affecting pidgin when speaking to a black man is explained thus:

To speak pidgin to a Negro makes him angry, because he himself is a pidgin-nigger-talker. But, I will be told, there is no wish, no intention to anger him. I grant this; but it is just this absence of wish, this lack of interest, this indifference, this automatic manner of classifying him, imprisoning him, primitivizing him, decivilizing him, that makes him angry. [...] But we can already state that to talk pidgin-nigger is to express this thought: "You'd better keep your place."(20-21)

Finally, the origin of the complex of inferiority engendered in colonial subjects is

directly proportional to the colonizer's sense of superiority. Indeed, it exists precisely because of that initial sense of superiority, which would be impossible (or at least unlikely) if not for the racist structure of Western societies. In this regard, Fanon also provides a useful tool for analysis: there are no 'degrees' to racism at a societal level, a society is either racist in its very framework or it is not. And, in the case of the European colonial enterprise, European societies were racist in their structure (and continue to be: the myths that guided colonial exploitation still linger within the Western cultural framework) and imposed this structure on the colonies: "The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European's feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior*"(69). A final excerpt from Fanon delineates the concept further:

In other words, I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me, makes me a colonized native, robs me of all worth, all individuality, tells me that I am a parasite on the world, that I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with the white world [...] Then I will quite simply try to make myself white: that is, I will compel the white man to acknowledge that I am human.(73)

A third issue is presented in the work of Homi Bhabha, connected to Fanon's illustration of the assimilation to the colonizer's culture but more ambiguous in its outcome, i.e. the concept of mimicry. Mimicry consists in the assumption by the colonial subject of the colonizer's norms, language, and culture. It is *de facto* an imitation of the colonizer's culture and Bhabha locates an example of its origin in Indian colonial society in the need of British officers to dispose of colonial subjects as intermediaries between them and the local culture, therefore creating a class of individuals who was not English but spoke the language and the culture of the mother country: a class of men who were almost English, but not quite, almost white, but not quite. The status and significance of mimicry is more complex, however, a status which Bhabha identifies as fundamentally ambivalent. Indeed, Bhabha defines mimicry as a metonymy of presence, a strategy which was born of a specific desire on the part of the colonizer:

If I may adapt Samuel Weber's formulation of the marginalizing vision of castration, then colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*.<sup>24</sup>

Mimicry is, thus, the locus of "a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform,

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24 Homi Bhabha. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (Spring 1984): 126.

regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power"(126). Furthermore, mimicry also contains the potential for subversion, insofar as a partial presence is granted to the colonial subject, which is thus able to pass from being solely the object of the colonizer's gaze and surveillance to turning a gaze of his own on the colonizer:

It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the *ambivalence* of mimicry (almost the same, *but not quite*) does not merely "rupture" the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence. By "partial" I mean both "incomplete" and "virtual." It is as if the very emergence of the "colonial" is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition *within* the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.(127)

And also:

But they are also, as I have shown, the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as "inappropriate" colonial subjects. A desire that, through the repetition of *partial presence*, which is the basis of mimicry, articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority. It is a desire that reserves "in part" the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer's presence. A gaze of otherness, that shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze which, as Foucault describes it, liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man's being through which he extends his sovereignty.(129)

Upon shifting the focus back on the work of Chimamanda Adichie, elements of mimicry or the inferiority complex internalized by the (ex) colonial subject are scattered throughout her texts and mentions of issues that may be tied to these concepts have already been introduced. Adichie's mention of her schooling having been administered entirely in English or her early readings having been entirely Western and white in nature are both manifestations of a power structure which is still enacted in the present. It is a structure whereby indigenous cultures are not only destabilized, but also absent from the dominant idea of culture itself. This leads to the creation of the psychoexistential complex theorized by Fanon: in Adichie's case, she relates her experience of an acquired sense of inferiority in her being led to believe as a child that black people were not intrinsically worthy subjects of literature. Moreover, issues of language, particularly the social value attributed to proficiency in the English language, are associated to multiple characters in her novels. She represents Nigerian society as placing a momentous importance on the mastery of English and a 'proper' accent, while

also showing how countries such as the US are often inherently dismissive of accents which denote an 'ethnic' provenance. In a passage previously quoted from *Americanah*, Adichie writes that, in the United States, whiteness is a thing to aspire to and, accordingly, characters such as Eugene Achike of *Purple Hibiscus*, the violent father of the young protagonist Kambili, or Emenike of *Americanah*, friend of main characters Ifemelu and Obinze, pride themselves in their mastery of the external signifiers of Western culture. In the case of Papa Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus*, his care for English elocution is directly tied to his perception of Western cultures as superior, as is highlighted in multiple passages of the novel:

"*Omelora!*" the man said in the forceful tone people used when they called others by their titles. "I am leaving now. I want to see if I can buy a few Christmas things for my children at Oye Abagana." He spoke English with an Igbo accent so strong it decorated even the shortest words with extra vowels. Papa liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense. (*PH*, 60)

Also, in a later episode, referring to Kambili's maternal grandfather:

Papa still talked about him often, his eyes proud, as if Grandfather were his own father. He opened his eyes before many of our people did, Papa would say; he was one of the few who welcomed the missionaries. Do you know how quickly he learned English? When he became an interpreter, do you know how many converts he helped win? Why, he converted most of Abba himself! He did things the right way, the way white people did, not what our people do now! (*PH*, 67)

Likewise, in *Americanah*, Emenike is described as striving to improve his social status, a move which he inherently ties to the desire to leave Nigeria and an appreciation for all the symbolic markers of Western lifestyle:

"Ginika, where in America are you going?" Emenike asked. He was awed by people who went abroad. After Kayode came back from a trip to Switzerland with his parents, Emenike had bent down to caress Kayode's shoes, saying "I want to touch them because they have touched snow." (*A*, 78)

However, for all his attempts to hide his origins and poverty once he does manage to relocate to London and marry a successful white lawyer, Emenike remains somewhat of a *parvenu* in the eyes of his Nigerian peers, as seen through the perspective of Obinze in the following excerpt:

He was making fun of his wife, but Obinze knew, from the muted awe in his tone, that it was mockery coloured by respect, mockery of what he believed, despite himself, to be inherently superior. Obinze remembered how Kayode had often said about Emenike in secondary school: He can read all the books he wants but the bush is still in his blood. (*A*, 326)

Finally, what is yet more interesting about Emenike is how he believes to have acquired

a British and thus Western identity by virtue of his marriage and the scope of possibilities it gave him, implicitly reinforcing a hierarchical structure that places whiteness as superior and proximity to it as socially elevating. Once more from Obinze's perspective: "'But the Americans love us Brits, they love the accent and the Queen and the double-decker,' Emenike said. There, it had been said: the man considered himself British" (A, 335-336).

In conclusion, Adichie chooses to address specifically postcolonial issues by deliberately engaging with representation and the inferiority complex fostered by the structures inherited from colonialism. In the following section, the contours of postcolonial feminism and Adichie's relation to it will be examined in order to reveal the diverse portrayals of Third World women she creates.

### ***3.2 Postcolonial Feminism and the Third World Woman***

The present section will provide an overview of the concept of postcolonial feminism and how feminism and postcolonialism may be mutually informed, as well as identify the elements in Chimamanda Adichie's work and engagement which make her a postcolonial feminist. By way of definition, much like the broader term 'postcolonialism', postcolonial feminism indicates the production of knowledge and activism which arises from the tricontinental area known as the Third World and which contests dominant structures of power, often in reaction to Western feminism. Postcolonial feminisms acquire their unique status with specific regards to the legacy of colonialism and to their relation to Western feminisms. Robert Young illustrates the possible contours of a postcolonial type of feminism thus:

At its most general, postcolonial feminism involves any challenge to dominant patriarchal ideologies by women of the third world. Such political activism may consist of contesting local power structures, or it may be a question of challenging racist or Eurocentric views of men and women (including feminists) in the first world. In the postcolonial state, postcolonial feminism begins from the perception that its politics are framed by the active legacies of colonialism, by the institutional infrastructures that were handed over by the colonial powers to elite groups, or appropriated by later elites. All women working for equality against the many obstacles embedded in such a framework engage with these kind of realities in the postcolony.<sup>25</sup>

While it would be incorrect to make sweeping generalizations about postcolonial feminism as a unified phenomenon, given the diversity of countries, histories, and cultures involved, it is nevertheless useful to the purpose of analysis to examine two

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25 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 109.

features which are peculiar to the status of women, scholars, and activists in the Third World. The first of these features concerns the location of women in the Third World at the intersection between modernity (as conceived by the West) and postcolonial nationalisms (concerned with local cultures and traditions). Modernity, as it is generally conceived in Western countries, comprises an economic system based on the capitalist model, the use and availability of a range of technologies, and the normalization of concepts such as democracy and equality. The outcome for women's rights of the latter elements have been the basis for gender activism in the West and specific elements of this framework could prove appealing to groups of non-Western women. Postcolonial nationalisms, on the other hand, are geared towards the creation of a nation-state in reaction to what was the dominant colonial system and seek to recover the sovereignty of cultures and traditions which Western imperialism had devalued, marginalized, and uprooted. The peculiar situation that is thus posited for women at this intersection is reminiscent of bell hook's words on the status of African American women during the social movements of the 1960s, where many women were torn between accepting an alignment with (often racist) white feminism against patriarchal subjugation or entirely aligning their efforts with black liberation groups against racism, which nevertheless upheld patriarchal structures. The situation proposed here is no less problematic, insofar as, while postcolonial nationalism may wish to uphold traditions which are potentially damaging to women's rights, Western 'modernity' and Western feminism remain largely imperialistic in their dealings with the Third World.

As far as the imperialism of Western 'modernity' is concerned, an overt example may be found directly in the colonial era, specifically in the colonial policies which were purportedly aimed at improving the condition of women in a Third World country by banning certain traditional or religious practices and enforcing Western ways (for example, in the case of forced unveiling in the Maghreb). This practice is known as 'colonial feminism' and, while on the surface it may appear to be moved by humanitarian impulses, the reality of its politics was often still entrenched in colonial control. Young elaborates the concept in the following passage:

These interventions by the colonial state against social practices that oppressed women have been described as 'colonial feminism', that is where the colonial government intervened on behalf of women, claiming it was doing so on humanitarian grounds. Sometimes these measures operated simultaneously as forms of colonial control. The colonial authorities were often sympathetic to those interventions that they regarded as a way of transforming the values of societies whose traditions resisted their rule. This was clearest with respect to the French colonial policy of forced unveiling in the

Maghreb. In all cases, it was entirely predictable that such legislative acts would become the focus for nationalist resistance. (97)

Indeed, nationalist resistance did often take the form of a reinstatement of cultural traditions, with specific regards to the position of women, against the forced 'modernity' of the colonial state. Once again, the similarity to bell hook's theorization of the fundamentally patriarchal nature of male black liberation movements of 1960s America is poignant: in the fight for the construction of a 'nation' (in itself a European concept) independent of the usurpation of the West, many Third World nationalist movements rejected to a large extent the cultural markers of Western 'modernity' and moved to uphold traditional structures which did not necessarily contain prospects for progressive change for women. Women's battles in many Third World countries, therefore, did not end with decolonization. In Young's words:

Cultural nationalists tended to define themselves not against modernity in terms of technology, but against its implications for women. Women are often taken to represent the mainstay of the cultural identity of the nation, retrieved for the present from the society of the past. For macho-nationalists, home and the domestic sphere, relatively free from colonial control, was the best guardian of the traditional values, culture, and identity of the new phenomenon they were creating on the European model against their European masters, 'the nation'. Women and modernity came to be regarded as antithetical entities, with the result that the goal of national emancipation involved a betrayal of all prospect of progressive change for women. (96)

While the intersection of 'modernity' and postcolonial nationalism places many women in an ambiguous position, it would be historically inaccurate to conflate all gender activism as native to the West (as is often done, both in defense of the supposed 'universal values' of Western feminism and in its condemnation as an alien concept which is incompatible with Third World realities). The term 'feminism' may have been coined in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but gender activism has a documented history in Third World countries as well. The solution to the ambivalent situation posited by this intersection, therefore, does not necessarily imply either total alignment with feminism in its Western forms or renunciation to all gender activism, but rather a broadening of the framework (such as suggested by Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality) so as to include the diversity and specificity of needs of women all over the world in the mainstream discourse on feminism.

The second feature hereby presented concerns the imperialism latent within contemporary Western feminism's representation of the 'average' Third World woman and her demands. As a matter of fact, colonization need not concern only an exploitative

economic and political model, but also a specific construction of ideology as well, as illustrated by Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

The term 'colonization' has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the 'third world'. However sophisticated or problematical its use as an explanatory construct, colonization almost invariably implies a relation of structural domination and a discursive or political suppression of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question.<sup>26</sup>

It is precisely here that the basis for Western feminism's discursive imperialism is set, i.e. on its self-presentation as a universal standard for gender activism and an 'enlightened' model for all women's rights, especially in comparison to its Other, the oppressed Third World woman, who is presented homogeneously and ahistorically in the role of a victim in need of intervention. While what has come to be defined as Western feminism is far from unified in its currents and composition (e.g. radical, cultural, liberal feminisms, etc.) it may be said to be more or less coherent in the analytical strategies it employs to view and construct a compact vision of what Mohanty calls the 'average Third World woman'. Indeed, this strategy is not dissimilar from the identity-building inherent in the colonial process: the colonizing country rallies behind a unified identity in reaction to its representation of the total difference of its Other, the colony. Correspondingly, Western feminism constructs a unified view of the needs and experiences of Third World women (and Third World feminisms) using ethnocentric parameters which present the concerns of the Western woman as universally applicable, implicitly reaffirming a hierarchical structure (where the Western woman has access to more and better rights) as it continuously represents the 'average' Third World woman as oppressed. The relation of implicit dominance Western feminism reinforces when it turns its gaze on women in the Third World (within the domain of literature, for example) is made explicit by Spivak in the following passage on the analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century British literature:

It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm. It is supported and operated by an information-retrieval approach to 'Third World' literature which often employs a deliberately 'nontheoretical' methodology with self-conscious rectitude.<sup>27</sup>

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26 Chandra Talpade Mohanty. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Reina Lewis, Sara Mills (London: Routledge, 2003), 49.

27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, 306.

Likewise, Mohanty defines mainstream Western feminist discourse on the Third World as carrying the "implicit assumption of 'the west' (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis"<sup>28</sup> and, thus, effectively 'colonizing' the realities of actual Third World women when it represents them as a monolithic group outside of history and context. In particular, Mohanty identifies three analytical presuppositions that result in this single story of the Third World woman, the first concerning the scope and significance of the category of 'women' as it is conceived by the West:

The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (52)

This approach, however, is blind to context, since it does not consider that categories of difference (by sex, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) are not inherently and equally present in all societies, but rather arise from actions and relations between individuals and groups within the scope of culturally specific contexts, with regards to the transformations that inevitably occur throughout history.

The second and third presuppositions are centered on methodological and political concerns:

The second analytical presupposition is evident on the methodological level, in the uncritical way 'proof' of universality and cross-cultural validity are provided. The third is a more specifically political presupposition, underlying the methodologies and the analytical strategies, i.e., the model of power and struggle they imply and suggest. (52)

Therefore, it is the presuppositions inherent in the strategies for analysis that Western feminists employ that morph the heterogeneity and the diversity of concerns and contexts of Third World women into a single story of their oppression, thus effectively producing the image of the 'average Third World woman'. As Mohanty states, it is in this specific mode of representation that an imperialist power structure lies:

It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent western feminist writing and this power needs to be defined and named. (50-51)

However, it is not only Western feminists who reaffirm this structure, Third World scholars may contribute to its endurance as well. Indeed, it has been argued by Mohanty that Third World scholars are capable of complicity with this system of 'othering' in

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<sup>28</sup> Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 49.

virtue of what is often their privileged status, considering many scholars are urban and middle-class or belong to an intellectual elite but choose to focus their research on the rural, lower classes in their countries. Mohanty elaborates thus:

Similar arguments pertaining to questions of methods of analysis can be made in terms of middle-class, urban African and Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm and codifies peasant and working-class histories and culture as Other. (50)

Moreover, Third World scholars may also participate in the system of information-retrieval mentioned previously in the quote by Gayatri Spivak. The information-retrieval approach consists in providing Western scholarship with material and data from Third World countries that reinforces the idea of Western feminism as 'enlightened' and Third World women as perpetual victims, in the light of an imperialist, paternalistic attitude where the postcolonies are seen as requiring the aid of a white savior. Within the African context, Fatima Adamu cites Obioma Nnaemeka's definition of a 'women's studies business' when referring to this exchange between indigenous and foreign scholarship:

The indigenous elites provide the data and information about barbaric misogynous practices in Africa, while their collaborators embark upon a civilizing mission to save the women. Thus the indigenous elites are provided with funds to fight such practices. In this process, the foreign experts are provided with even more data to process and modify in order to uphold the ethnocentric belief that anything Western is good and civilized, and anything not Western is bad and barbaric. Hence, many of the women's issues raised and gaining international attention stem from non-Western societies.<sup>29</sup>

It, therefore, comes with no surprise that tensions should arise between what is deemed as Western feminism and a specifically postcolonial approach to feminism, where the specificity of local contexts, histories and cultures must necessarily be taken into consideration in order to grant full humanity and dignity to its subjects.

Within this context, Chimamanda Adichie is not a postcolonial feminist solely in virtue of her status as a self-proclaimed feminist and a native of a postcolony, but also and perhaps mostly because of her continued engagement in the diverse representation of the shifting needs and identities of Nigerian women in her novels. Adichie refuses to present her readership with a single story of Mohanty's 'average Third World woman' (which coincides with the more general Western view of Africa as a place of only poverty and strife), but she is instead committed to the representation of her characters as fully actualized subjects, as "fierce consumers of life"<sup>30</sup> who are immersed in the

29 Adamu, "Women's Struggle and the Politics of Difference in Nigeria", 4-5.

30 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", 51.

peculiarities of their history and context. On a further note, Adichie engages with the concepts of culture and tradition and the representation of oppression in a humanizing fashion, rather than a de-humanizing one. For example, she identifies with and loves Igbo culture, as is evident from her representation of it in her works, however, simultaneously, she is willing to contest (from her position as an Igbo woman) the parts of her culture that she recognizes as unfair to women. In *Dear Ijeawele*, her suggestion for the construction of identity for a young Igbo girl is the following:

Let her grow up to think of herself as, among other things, a proud Igbo woman. And you must be selective – teach her to embrace the parts of Igbo culture that are beautiful and teach her to reject the parts that are not. You can say to her, in different contexts and different ways, 'Igbo culture is lovely because it values community and consensus and hard work, and the language and proverbs are beautiful and full of great wisdom. But Igbo culture also teaches that a woman cannot do certain things just because she's a woman and that is wrong. Igbo culture also focuses a little too much on materialism, and while money is important – because money means self-reliance – you must not value people based on who has money and who does not.'<sup>31</sup>

In this regard, Adichie's approach is coherent to Young's idea of the importance of protesting power from within the social structure (as opposed to Western scholarship denouncing injustice on the basis of Western analytical parameters) and to Mohanty's claim that contradictions within a power structure become evident within the structure itself (once again, without the need for imposing foreign parameters). Young elaborates his concept in the following manner:

While women struggle with the legacies of colonialism in the postcolonial era, they are repeatedly accused of importing western ideas. Well-meaning interventions by western feminists, human rights groups, and Ford Foundation-funded non-governmental organizations can at times end up by making life more complicated for local feminists. Development of all kinds comes best from below rather than being imposed from above.<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, Mohanty posits Maria Mies's study of the lace-makers of Narsapur as a thorough analysis of a particular context and group of women, especially insofar as it examines how resistance is already inherent to power structures, e.g. how the women themselves are ambivalent or opposed to the exploitative structure of the lace-making business. This, Mohanty states, must be the basis for all effective political strategy against oppression: the comprehension of a given history and context and the focal importance of agency for its subjects. In Mohanty's words:

Finally, this mode of local, political analysis, which generates theoretical categories from within the situation and context being analysed, also suggests corresponding

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31 Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 249-259.

32 Young, *Postcolonialism*, 97.

effective strategies for organizing against the exploitations faced by the lace-makers. Here Narsapur women are not mere victims of the production process, because they resist challenge and subvert the process at various junctures. [...] It is only by understanding the *contradictions* inherent in women's location within various structures that effective political action and challenges can be devised.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, Adichie also refuses to depict victimhood or oppression as inherently saintly, which is in itself a de-humanizing construct because it reduces the complexity of an individual to a single characteristic. As previously noted, Adichie does not shy away from the fullness of representation and doing so necessarily involves showing an oppressed category as capable of agency in both positive and negative actions. This is exemplified in her words on the representation of Biafra in *Half of a Yellow Sun*:

I was very aware, as I wrote, of the problem that often comes with being a defeated people – and the Igbo are in many ways a defeated people. It is not only that you learn to bear a collective shame, but that you sometimes go to extremes of reaction. The survivors' sense of defeat and injustice can result in their making a utopia of Biafra, when it may very well have become yet another state of tyranny. I wanted to avoid making Biafra a *utopia-in-retrospect*, which would have been disingenuous – it would have sullied the memories of all those who died.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, her refusal to represent the oppressed as necessarily innocent also revolves around the idea of dignity as a fundamental human right, i.e. saintliness (or any other unachievable standard of moral propriety) must not be the requisite for dignity in our view of the oppressed. This also takes a particularly gendered turn when, for example, a society perceives only the 'good' women as deserving of respect and rights, thus arbitrarily dividing women into 'good' and 'bad', often according to how well they conform to societal expectations of their gender. In Adichie's own words:

In teaching her about oppression, be careful not to turn the oppressed into saints. Saintliness is not a prerequisite for dignity. People who are unkind and dishonest are still human, and still deserve dignity. Property rights for rural Nigerian women, for example, is a major feminist issue, and the women do not need to be good and angelic to be allowed their property rights. There is sometimes, in the discourse around gender, the assumption that women are supposed to be morally 'better' than men. They are not. Women are as human as men are. Female goodness is as normal as female evil.<sup>35</sup>

Adichie, therefore, proposes a reading of postcolonial feminism as concerned with the representation of the humanity and complexity of Third World women as individuals. Far from casting them as a monolithic group, her attention to context and cultural background is fundamental to understanding the motivations which drive her characters, while her commitment to the representation of the African continent, and

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33 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 61-62.

34 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", 50.

35 Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 376-285.

especially Nigeria, as diverse and multifaceted necessarily includes the depiction of women. The following chapter will shift the focus from a theoretical analysis of the frameworks shaping Adichie's feminism to a direct analysis of her novels and her collection of short stories.

## 4. EXPLORING ADICHIE'S TEXTS

### *4.1 Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, was written during her stay in the United States and first published in 2003 by Algonquin Books. The novel is set against the backdrop of the civil and political unrest of 1990s Nigeria and follows the story of fifteen year-old Kambili Achike, daughter of an affluent but abusive factory owner and his meek, submissive wife, as she grows into herself and literally finds her voice. The space of the text alternates between the luxurious but sterile Achike household in Enugu, where Kambili and her brother Jaja are trapped under Papa's oppressive rule, and Auntie Ifeoma's significantly poorer but lively home in Nsukka, where the siblings spend their holidays and enjoy greater freedom. *Purple Hibiscus* reads like a *Bildungsroman* told from the perspective of a young teenage girl who faces the personal drama of physical and emotional abuse and its psychological repercussions, in addition to the natural turbulence of adolescence, when budding desire and a growing sense of self emerge. To a lesser extent, Jaja's personal transformation is narrated as well, albeit as seen through Kambili's eyes.

My theory for *Purple Hibiscus* is that Adichie shows Kambili embark on her journey of self-discovery through a series of oppositions. The oppositions in the novel range from differences between single characters to more general oppositions between reality and appearance or the private and public spheres. Within this section, oppositions will be grouped into five main categories and examined accordingly.

The first opposition that is arguably central to the structure of the novel is between private and public life, specifically the discrepancy between domestic violence within the home and outer appearances and between the background of history and individual experience. As a matter of fact, Eugene Achike is a textbook abuser towards both his wife and his children. He displays behaviors traditionally associated to abusive,

narcissistic personalities, such as emotional manipulation, capillary control of his family in all their daily activities, and violent outbursts whenever he perceives disobedience. His household in Enugu is a place of strict routine and control of his children, as narrated by Kambili in the description of her daily schedule (which Eugene compiles personally):

Jaja sat on my bed for a while longer before he went downstairs to have lunch; I pushed my textbook aside, looked up, and stared at my daily schedule, pasted on the wall above me. *Kambili* was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as *Jaja* was written on the schedule above Jaja's desk in his room. I wondered when Papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother, if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep. He revised them often. When we were in school, we had less siesta time and more study time, even on weekends. When we were on vacation, we had a little more family time, a little more time to read newspapers, play chess or monopoly, and listen to the radio. (*PH*, 23-24)

Conversely, despite their father's conditioning and control being still immensely pervasive, the siblings' time in Abba, the ancestral home of Eugene, offers some respite. Their greater freedom seems nevertheless to revolve around the necessity of Eugene's activities rather than personal choice:

In Abba, Jaja and I had no schedules. We talked more and sat alone in our rooms less, because Papa was too busy entertaining the endless stream of visitors and attending church council meetings at five in the morning and town council meetings until midnight. Or maybe it was because Abba was different, because people strolled into our compound at will, because the very air we breathed moved more slowly. (*PH*, 59)

The force of Eugene's control is carried out through the vehicle of Catholic doctrine. Himself a zealot, Papa enforces his rule by imbuing his words in the self-righteousness of piety and, therefore, any deviance from his will becomes a sin and an act against God. While reproaching Kambili for having placed only second in the list of the top students in her class, he states: "Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges. Because God has given you much, he expects much from you. He expects perfection" (*PH*, 46). It is not God, however, who is demanding but Eugene himself, it is his interpretation of doctrine which is imposed on his family at the cost of bodily harm. The result is that, for Kambili (and, on the surface, for her mother and brother as well), his word is synonymous with righteousness, as unquestionable as faith in God itself. Kambili's initial attitude in the novel is thus one of complete submission to Eugene's words:

It sounded important, the way he said it, but then most of what Papa said sounded

important. He liked to lean back and look upwards when he talked, as though he were searching for something in the air. I would focus on his lips, the movement, and sometimes I forgot myself, sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice, to the important things he said. It was the same way I felt when he smiled, his face breaking open like a coconut with the brilliant white meat inside. (*PH*, 25)

Much of this submission is not solely obtained through emotional manipulation but also and perhaps primarily through the threat of physical abuse. Eugene's most frequent victim appears to be Beatrice, his wife, for whom he feels no empathy, not even when she is pregnant, and whom he beats repeatedly:

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five because I would talk about the biblical roots of the anointing of the sick during family time, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parent's hand-carved bedroom door. I imagined the door had gotten stuck and Papa was trying to open it. I sat down, closed my eyes, and started to count. Counting made it seem not that long, made it seem not that bad. [...] I stepped out of my room just as Jaja came out of his. We stood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme border. (*PH*, 32-33)

Kambili would later be told by Beatrice: "There was an accident, the baby is gone" (*PH*, 34). In a later passage:

"You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne*? Your father broke it on my belly." She sounded as if she were talking about someone else, as if the table were not made of sturdy wood. "My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it." Mama shook her head slowly. A thin line of tears crawled down her cheeks as though it had been a struggle for them to get out of her eyes. [...] "I was six weeks gone." (*PH*, 248)

Eugene's punishments, however, do not touch Beatrice alone, but are also doled out to his children. For example, upon discovering they had shared Auntie Ifeoma's house with Papa-Nnukwu, his 'heathen' father, he pours boiling water on their feet, injuring both Kambili and Jaja. On one occasion of his beating Jaja, Eugene breaks one of his fingers to the point of irreparable damage, once again for reasons of academic achievement:

When he was ten, he had missed two questions on his catechism test and was not named the best in his First Holy Communion class. Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right, and Papa drove him to St. Agnes hospital. Papa was crying, too, as he carried Jaja in his arms like a baby all the way to the car. Later, Jaja told me that Papa had avoided his right hand because it is the hand he writes with. (*PH*, 145)

In one of the most poignant episodes in the novel, Kambili is found with a portrait of Papa-Nnukwu drawn by her cousin Amaka and Eugene beats her senseless, causing her to suffer enough damage to warrant a long hospital stay:

I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. The stinging was

raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, "Please, *biko*, please." More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (*PH*, 210)

Despite the personal torture experienced by Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice at the hands of Eugene, the contrast in the text is soon evident when outside perception of him is considered. Indeed, from a purely superficial gaze, Eugene emerges as a pious and generous man, an honest businessman and the fearless owner of the *Standard*, a newspaper willing to speak out against the dangerously oppressive political situation in 1990s Nigeria. Furthermore, he holds traditional political titles in Abba, despite his lack of faith in the Igbo institutions and traditions of pre-colonial Nigeria. An excerpt from the first section of the novel:

We were always prepared to feed the whole village at Christmas, always prepared so that none of the people who came in would leave without eating and drinking to what Papa called a reasonable level of satisfaction. Papa's title was omelora, after all, The One Who Does for the Community. (*PH*, 56)

Eugene's generosity with people outside of his closest family circle (and, indeed, also his manic preoccupation for his wife and children's possible fall into sin) does, in fact, appear to come from a place of sincere feeling, albeit blind to the evils he is simultaneously able to perpetrate:

Papa organized Ade Coker's funeral; he set up a trust for Yewande Coker and the children, bought them a new house. He paid the *Standard* staff huge bonuses and asked them all to take a long leave. Hollows appeared under his eyes during those weeks, as if someone had suctioned the delicate flesh, leaving his eyes sunken in. (*PH*, 206-207)

A further aspect of the contrast between the public and the private consists in the relation between the historical backdrop against which the novel is set and the individual stories of Kambili and the other characters, how History invades the space of the personal. As a matter of fact, on a superficial level, *Purple Hibiscus* appears to be the narration of a single story of domestic abuse and its effects, however, the greater climate of unrest in Nigeria is inextricable from the plot. That the novel is set in the early 1990s – and specifically at the onset of General Sani Abacha's rule in 1993 – is evident from multiple passages in the novel, depicting state-sanctioned abuse, suppression of rights, and social unrest. Abacha's military coup is directly referenced early on in the text:

It was during family time the next day, a Saturday, that the coup happened. Papa had just checkmated Jaja when we heard the martial music on the radio, the solemn strains

making us stop to listen. A general with a strong Hausa accent came on and announced that there had been a coup and that we had a new government. [...] Coups beget coups, he said, telling us about the bloody coups of the sixties, which ended up in civil war just after he left Nigeria to study in England. A coup always began a vicious cycle. Military men would always overthrow one another, because they could, because they were all power drunk. (*PH*, 24)

The subsequent expulsion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth in 1995, in accordance to the principles of the Harare Commonwealth Declaration of 1991 and in reaction to the execution of author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, is also referenced in the novel. Toyin Falola and Matthew Heaton describe the international status of Nigeria under Abacha's rule thus:

The hanging of Ken Saro-Wiwa and the other seven Ogoni activists cemented Nigeria's position as a pariah state in the international community. Pro-democracy elements that had fled Nigeria successfully raised international awareness of this case, which illustrated Abacha's blatant disregard for justice and human rights. After the hanging of Saro-Wiwa, the Commonwealth of Nations, consisting of the United Kingdom and its former colonies, went so far as to suspend Nigeria's membership in its organization.<sup>1</sup>

The exclusion of Nigeria from the Commonwealth is depicted in *Purple Hibiscus* as news from the radio, with the detailing of the murder of Nwankiti Ogechi, none other than a fictionalized Ken Saro-Wiwa:

During family time, while Papa and I played chess, Papa winning, we heard on the radio that Nigeria had been suspended from the Commonwealth because of the murder, that Canada and Holland were recalling their ambassadors in protest. The newscaster read a small portion of the press release from the Canadian government, which referred to Nwankiti Ogechi as "a man of honor." (*PH*, 200)

History enters the characters' lives in a very personal way, as they are not only spectators of the riots and the abuse but also often victims of it themselves. Eugene, as the owner of a dissident newspaper, is a prime target of government reprimand and, although he himself is never directly touched, his editor, Ade Coker, is murdered for covering Ogechi's execution. Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, is a university lecturer in Nsukka and suffers the authoritarian shift to a sole administrator. Not only is she affected by the closures and riots, she is also subsequently labeled a dissident professor, with government officials going so far as to sack her home in reprimand. An episode which is particularly poignant in showing the resonance between violence in Nigerian society and violence within Kambili's family belongs to the beginning of the novel, when she, Beatrice, and Jaja flee the market just as soldiers arrive to raid the area. Kambili watches the abuse pointedly inflicted on the women in the market, the casual disregard

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1 Toyin Falola, Matthew Heaton. *A History of Nigeria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 232.

for their dignity, and feels a sense of recognition:

As we left the markets with our sandals and some fabric Mama had bought, we saw a small crowd gathered around the vegetable stalls we had passed earlier, the ones lining the road. Soldiers were milling around. Market women were shouting, and many had both hands placed on their heads, in the way that people do to show despair or shock. A woman lay in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short afro. Her wrapper had come undone and her white underwear showed. [...] As we hurried past, I saw a woman spit at a soldier, I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulder. Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing. [...] I thought about the woman lying in the dirt as we drove home. I had not seen her face, but I felt that I knew her, that I had always known her. I wished I could have gone over and helped her up, cleaned the red mud from her wrapper. (PH, 44)

The second opposition that is largely present in the novel is between the rich upper classes, either aligned with or against the ruling elite, and the more deprived middle-to-lower classes. Kambili Achike and her family belong to upper class society, as is evident from the opening pages of the text, where their spacious mansion is introduced. Indeed, despite his relatively humble background, Eugene owns multiple factories in the food industry, he has gained international recognition by receiving a human rights award, and he is referred to as a 'Big Man', a man so wealthy and powerful that he need not even bow to the Igwe<sup>2</sup> of their *umunna*<sup>3</sup>: "I thought the Igwe was supposed to stay at his palace and receive guests. I didn't know he visits people's homes,' Amaka said, as we went downstairs. 'I guess that's because your father is a Big Man'" (PH, 93). And also, in reference to the gate keeper in Abba who praised Eugene to the siblings:

His name was Haruna, he had told Jaja and me a few days before, and in his Hausa-accented English that reversed *P* and *F*, he told us that our pather was the best Big Man he had ever seen, the best emfloyer he had ever had. Did we know our pather faid his children's school pees? Did we know our pather had helpfed his wipe get the messenger job at the Local Government oppice? We were lucky to have such a pather. (PH, 102)

The Achike home in Enugu is described as spacious, with high ceilings, marble floors, and ample rooms. Kambili's narration indulges in details about how Beatrice periodically ordered new drapery for the bedrooms or how a private ritual between mother and children would consist in purchasing new leather sandals and bags before each school term (even if the old ones were in perfect condition). Conversely, once the siblings reach Auntie Ifeoma's apartment in Nsukka, Kambili is thrown into an existence radically different from her own: not only do Ifeoma and her children prepare their own meals with what they have at their disposal, the four of them regularly share a cramped

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2 A title of respect, a traditional ruler in Igboland.

3 A large group of families with a common male ancestor in Igbo society.

two-bedroom apartment, without regular access to running water, electricity or car fuel. Kambili's first impressions of the house reveal both its humble nature but also the liveliness which fills it (and which, on the contrary, her home in Enugu lacks):

Aunty Ifeoma still held on to me as we entered the living room. I noticed the low ceiling first, how low it was. I felt I could reach out and touch it; it was so unlike home, where the high ceilings gave our rooms an airy stillness. The pungent fumes of kerosene smoke mixed with the aroma of curry and nutmeg from the kitchen. (*PH*, 113)

Part of Ifeoma's economic difficulties lie her being a widow and the only breadwinner, but even more so in her being an underpaid lecturer at Nsukka University in a time of enforced closures, bloody student riots, and lists of 'disloyal' lecturers. Ifeoma belongs to a whole category of people who are ultimately forced to seek employment outside the country and, thus, her final choice to emigrate to America comes from a place of necessity for herself and her children:

"They should fire her, eh, so we can go to America," Obiora said. [...] "Aunty Phillipa is asking Mom to come over. At least people there get paid when they are supposed to," Amaka said, bitterly, as though she were accusing someone of something. "And Mom will have her work recognized in America, without any nonsense politics," Obiora said, nodding, agreeing with himself in case nobody else did. [...] "Do you know how long they have been sitting on her file?" Obiora asked. "She should have been senior lecturer years ago." (*PH*, 224)

The oppositions between economic conditions in the novel are not sole descriptors of society or class condition, they also serve to illustrate a paradox. As a matter of fact, while Kambili's Enugu home does not lack any material nourishment or comforts she should require, it is entirely lacking in emotional nurturing and protection, draining and impoverishing her instead. Simultaneously, Ifeoma's home is not as materially rich, but it is nevertheless there that Kambili finds enough emotional stability to discover her own voice. Ifeoma's Nsukka house overflows with chatter and activity, in distinct opposition to the "airy stillness" of the siblings' lives in Enugu, and it is there that they are most nurtured as individuals.

A further opposition in *Purple Hibiscus* revolves around the representation of traditional Igbo customs, a lifestyle modeled on colonialism, and a compromise between the two. Moreover, ways of living are inextricably tied to religion as their shaping framework and the lens through which Kambili is taught to view the world. As a matter of fact, considering Kambili as the narrator and main perspective for the novel, her background and the teachings of her father emerge as the initial, dominant representation of living. Indeed, Eugene is a Catholic zealot, immersed in religious self-

righteousness to the point of denouncing the traditional customs of his people as heathen and products of inferiority. Religion is the vehicle through which he exercises his control, but there is a strong imperialist component to it: Eugene does not merely adhere to Catholicism, he adheres to it because it was brought by white colonizers and thus brings him closer to whiteness. For example, he admires Beatrice's father, who emerges as a somewhat stern and loveless man, precisely because of his strict adherence to ideas and principles brought by colonizers. Eugene refuses to speak Igbo (except when his temper surfaces) and willingly prefers English because it is more 'civilized'. He rejects traditional customs and assumes Catholic doctrine to an almost parodistic extreme. From an early passage in the novel:

Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict. He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially with the white religious. As gracious as when he presented the check for refurbishing the Daughters of the Immaculate Heart library. He said he had just come to see my class, and Sister Margaret told him to let her know if he needed anything. (*PH*, 45)

In a sense, he has all the potential to be one of the 'mimic men' theorized by Bhabha, however without any subversive value: his mimicry may visualize colonial power, but, as a character, he is entirely subjugated to it. Eugene is a colonial product in a postcolonial time, as exemplified in a reported speech by Ifeoma:

Papa's sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault, as one would talk about a person who was shouting gibberish from a severe case of malaria. (*PH*, 13)

In fact, Eugene appears to incarnate the psychoexistential complex illustrated by Fanon, whereby the experience of colonial subjugation has produced a sense of inferiority rooted inside him. Such may be, precisely, the cause of Eugene's profound emotional and psychological volatility. Emerging from the experience of inferiority inherent to colonialism and the combination of white imperialism and religious strictness in missionary school, Eugene demands the complete subjugation of his 'inferiors' (his wife and children) to protect his fragile psychological balance, all the while replicating the violence of imperialism on a domestic scale. In point of fact, he, too, like the British colonizers, has a paternalistic attitude towards his victims, in the firm belief that he is saving them from themselves, that his punishments will show them the way to grace. The result, however, is a complete reversal of the Christian ethic of 'love thy neighbor' and, ultimately, just as coups beget more coups, violence calls for more violence and

Eugene meets his demise at the hands of his own wife, his prime victim.

On a further note, Eugene's religious hypocrisy and the urgent need to control the very bodies of his wife and children give room to the idea that his enforcement of a moral code based on fanatic Catholicism and white imperialism may come from a place of resistance to the abuse he experienced as a boy. Indeed, his retelling of his experience in missionary school reveals the bodily censorship he underwent, especially on the level of sexuality:

"I committed a sin against my own body once," he said. "And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St. Gregory's, came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it." Papa was looking right into my eyes. I did not know he had committed any sins, that he could commit any sins. "I never sinned against my own body again. The good father did that for my own good." he said. (*PH*, 196)

His enforcement of similar punishment within his home, therefore, may arise either from the need to replicate his history of abuse with victims of his own or from the desire to justify the wrongs he experienced. As Ehijele Femi Eromosele posited in *Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*:

[Eugene] wasn't imprisoning his children because he wanted them to be holy, but instead because he feared that they were too much like him. [...] Hence, Eugene attempts to justify his abuse because his fear is that one level of freedom would only lead to another, and would allow the children to discover a pleasure that had been denied to him. It can also be seen that his arrested self-discovery is at the root of his psychological imbalance.<sup>4</sup>

It may thus be seen that Eugene uses a mechanism of projection which does not allow him to view his family as individuals, but rather as the parts of himself that he identifies as prone to sin.

Conversely, Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene's father, is the highest representative of traditional customs and religion in the text. It is through Papa-Nnukwu that the reader is introduced to the traditional Igbo religious cosmos, where *Chukwu* is the High God, surrounded by minor deities, the *mmuo* are "spirits who climbed out of ant holes" (*PH*, 85), and the *chi* is a personal deity and guardian who manifests as *mmuo*. Because the narration is always framed through Kambili's perspective, the reader mostly views Papa-Nnukwu and his customs through either Eugene's disparaging words or Kambili's strictly Catholic frame of reference. Eugene refers to his father as "Godless" (38), "idol-worshipping" (47), and a heathen, going so far as to forbid his children from

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4 Ehijele Femi Eromosele. "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 9 (March 2013): 100.

consuming food or drink in his home:

"Kevin said you stayed up to twenty-five minutes with your grandfather. Is that what I told you?" Papa's voice was low. [...] "What did you do there? Did you eat food sacrificed to idols? Did you desecrate your Christian tongue?" I sat frozen; I did not know that tongues could be Christian, too. (*PH*, 69)

Kambili outgrows her initial dependency to her father's rule and, thus, her resistance to all customs outside Catholicism over the course of the novel and one episode in particular shows her learning about Papa-Nnukwu's faith with honest curiosity rather than through the filter of Eugene's teachings. It is during her stay in Nsukka, when, one morning, Ifeoma invites her to watch Papa-Nnukwu as he does his *itu-nzu*, a declaration of innocence, on the verandah:

He leaned down to draw a line on the floor with the nzu in his hand. He was speaking, his face down as if addressing the white chalk line, which now looked yellow. He was talking to the gods or the ancestors; I remembered Aunty Ifeoma saying that the two could be interchanged. [...] I was surprised that he prayed for Papa with the same earnestness that he prayed for himself and Aunty Ifeoma. [...] He was still smiling as I quietly turned and went back to the bedroom. I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did. (*PH*, 167-168)

Hence, Kambili slowly learns to accept difference from her own set of values and grows closer to a third position presented in the text, a compromise of sorts.

Undoubtedly, characters such as Ifeoma and Father Amadi represent the possibility of a Christian faith which does not need to reject Igbo traditional culture, but chooses instead to coexist alongside it and to include elements of it (such as church songs in Igbo, for example). Daria Tunca, for instance, states that *Purple Hibiscus* "promotes a moderate brand of Christianity that is respectful of ancestral Igbo traditions"<sup>5</sup>. Ifeoma in particular acts as a mediator between Kambili and traditional Igbo customs by showing her the 'normalcy' of difference. The reader soon learns from the text that Ifeoma is Christian, who, far from being a zealot, is able to integrate traditional customs with her faith, much to Kambili's surprise:

The first time I heard Aunty Ifeoma call Mama "*nwunye m*," years ago, I was aghast that a woman called another woman "my wife." When I asked, Papa said it was the remnants of ungodly traditions, the idea that it was the family and not the man alone that married a wife, and later Mama whispered, although we were alone in my room, "I am her wife, too, because I am your father's wife. It shows that she accepts me." (*PH*, 72-73)

Moreover, Ifeoma is able to reconcile her participation in the rituals of Christianity –

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5 Tunca. "The Confessions of a 'Buddhist Catholic': Religion in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," *Research in African Literatures* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 51.

Mass, saying grace before meals, and even pilgrimage to Aokpe, where apparitions were said to occur – with participation in traditional Igbo rituals, such as the simple act of bowing to her *umunna*'s Igwe or attending the annual *mmuo* festival alongside Papa-Nnukwu. Perhaps most importantly, Ifeoma is the one character who understands the strictness of Kambili and Jaja's background and thus attempts to teach them the value of tradition and that different faiths and customs can exist on equal ground with Christianity:

"Your Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist," Aunty Ifeoma said. I stared at her. Pagan, traditionalist, what did it matter? He was not Catholic, that was all; he was not of the faith. He was one of those people whose conversion we prayed for so that they did not end in the everlasting torment of hellfire. (*PH*, 81)

And also:

"How can Our Lady intercede on behalf of a heathen, Aunty?" Aunty Ifeoma was silent as she ladled the thick cocoyam paste into the soup pot; then she looked up and said Papa-Nnukwu was not a heathen but a traditionalist, that sometimes what was different was just as good as what was familiar, that when Papa-Nnukwu did his *itu-nzu*, his declaration of innocence, in the morning, it was the same as our saying the rosary. (*PH*, 166)

Likewise, Father Amadi as well acts as a figure of compromise between a fervent doctrine based on imperialistic principles and a Christianity which is more in touch with its local context. More specifically, Father Amadi is the perfect counterpoint to Father Benedict, the white priest in the Enugu church of St. Agnes to whom Eugene is much deferential. Indeed, Father Amadi is initially introduced as a visiting priest in St. Agnes whom Eugene immediately condemns for his use of song and of the Igbo language during service:

He was newly ordained, waiting to be assigned a parish, he told us. He and Father Benedict had a close mutual friend, and he was pleased when Father Benedict asked him to visit and say Mass. He did not say how beautiful our St. Agnes altar was, though, with its steps that glowed like polished ice blocks. Or that it was one of the best altars in Enugu, perhaps even in the whole of Nigeria. He did not suggest, as all the other visiting priests had, that God's presence dwelled more in St. Agnes, that the iridescent saints on the floor-to-ceiling stained-glass windows stopped God from leaving. And halfway through his sermon, he broke into an Igbo song: "*Bunie ya enu...*" (*PH*, 28)

Father Benedict's sermons, on the other hand, are described as "sparse" (28) and his voice a "pinch-your-nose monotone" (28). He himself is described thus:

Even though Father Benedict had been at St. Agnes for seven years, people still referred to him as "our new priest." Perhaps they would not have done so if he had not been white. He still looked new. [...] Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the Credo and the kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not

acceptable. Also, hand clapping was to be kept at a minimum, lest the solemnity of the Mass be compromised. But he allowed offertory songs in Igbo; he called them native songs, and when he said "native" his straight-line lips turned down at the corners to form an inverted U. (*PH*, 3-4)

Father Benedict's disdain for the integration of Igbo culture and his attention to solemnity are radically different from Father Amadi's approach to religion. In fact, Father Amadi has a more direct relationship with the members of his congregation, stopping by Ifeoma's home on multiple occasions and regularly playing football with a group of boys. His approach is not one of solemn, strict formality, but instead it is through him that Kambili learns priests can be normal human beings and members of the community, which initially shocks her:

"I played football at the stadium and afterward I took some of the boys to town, for *akara* and fried yams," he said, when Amaka asked what he had done today. [...] I could not help staring at him, because his voice pulled me and because I did not know a priest could play football. It seemed so ungodly, so common. (*PH*, 147)

Another fundamental opposition present in the text is between Kambili and her cousin Amaka and involves the experience of girlhood. Considering how *Purple Hibiscus* details Kambili's process of self-discovery, her initial phase is characterized by restriction on all fronts. Kambili is so deeply conditioned by her father that she has no outlet of expression. In a literal sense, Kambili has no voice, her demeanor is defined by silence and the avoidance of speech: "I mumbled to my plate, then started to cough as if real, sensible words would have come out of my mouth but for the coughing" (*PH*, 96). And also: "I filled my mouth, as if I might have said something but for the food I had to chew" (148). Furthermore, Kambili's fear and anxiety are such to resemble the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When she feels a situation precipitate in a way she knows will anger Eugene, she displays physical symptoms:

"It's a little too sweet. It would be nicer if you reduced the sugar in it." Amaka's tone was as polite and normal as everyday conversation with an older person. I was not sure if Papa nodded or if his head simply moved as he chewed. Another knot formed in my throat, and I could not get a mouthful of rice down. I knocked my glass over as I reached for it, and the blood-colored juice crept over the white lace tablecloth. Mama hastily placed a napkin on the spot, and when she raised the reddened napkin, I remembered her blood on the stairs. (*PH*, 98)

The censorship of Kambili's self-expression also involves her body, her freedom with it, and her general avoidance of bodiliness and nudity as sinful. Indeed, the expectations of her gender lock Kambili into a strict moral code: she must not show her hair, she must not uncover her body or wear trousers, and she must not look unto another person's

nudity. As exemplified in the text, such controlling expectations lurk under the pretense of pious modesty:

Once, Papa had hugged me proudly, kissed my forehead, because Father Benedict told him that my hair was always properly covered for Mass, that I was not like the other young girls in church who let some of their hair show, as if they did not know that exposing your hair in church was ungodly. (*PH*, 99-100)

And from a previous passage, just before attending the *mmuo* festival:

"Kambili, I think you will be more comfortable in trousers," Aunty Ifeoma said as we walked to the car. "I'm fine, Aunty," I said. I wondered why I did not tell her that all my skirts stopped well past my knees, that I did not own any trousers because it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers. (*PH*, 79)

Amaka, on the other hand, appears as the specular image of Kambili, as they are in the same age group but their experiences of adolescence and specifically girlhood are largely opposed. It is conceivable to imagine that Amaka takes after her mother, insofar as she is outspoken, strong-willed, and deeply opinionated. Kambili herself marvels at Amaka's ability to speak up with such ease and confidence: "I wondered how Amaka did it, how she opened her mouth and had words flow easily out" (98). Self-expression and differentiation are a staple of Amaka's character, ranging from her desire to discuss a variety of topics to her interest in art and painting, to her deeply political choice of music:

She turned the cassette player on, nodding to the polyphonic beat of drums. "I listen mostly to indigenous musicians. They're culturally conscious; they have something real to say. Fela and Osadebe and Onyeka are my favorites. Oh, I'm sure you probably don't know who they are, I'm sure you're into American pop like other teenagers." She said "teenagers" as if she were not one, as if teenagers were a brand of people who, by not listening to culturally conscious music, were a step beneath her. And she said "culturally conscious" in the proud way that people say a word they never knew they would learn until they do. (*PH*, 117)

Likewise, Amaka is not held back by restricting expectations of modesty and femininity, she was not raised to feel shame about her body or her nakedness and Kambili is shown to envy her ability to do something as simple as freely wearing lipstick. Meanwhile, her initial attitude towards Kambili is antagonistic and distrustful, created by the false impression that Kambili's aloofness arises from snobbery rather than fear. However, it may also be stated that precisely Amaka's antagonism, compounded with Ifeoma's nudging, could be the final catalyst for Kambili to find a voice of her own and finally express her true feelings:

"Why?" Amaka burst out. "Because rich people do not prepare *orah* in their houses? Won't she participate in eating the *orah* soup?" Aunty Ifeoma's eyes hardened – she

was not looking at Amaka, she was looking at me. "*O ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!" [...] "You don't have to shout, Amaka," I said, finally. "I don't know how to do the *orah* leaves, but you can show me." I did not know where the calm words had come from. I did not want to look at Amaka, did not want to see her scowl, did not want to prompt her to say something else to me, because I knew I could not keep up. I thought I was imagining it when I heard the cackling, but then I looked at Amaka – and sure enough, she was laughing. "So your voice can be this loud, Kambili," she said. (*PH*, 169)

From this moment onwards Amaka's distrust subsides and leaves way for a steadfast friendship to form, particularly beneficial to Kambili because Amaka's brazenness allows her to voice words Kambili never could on her own. This is especially poignant when facing the theme of young, female desire, which is fundamental to the plot. Indeed, Kambili's journey towards self-discovery entails the blossoming of romantic and sexual interest, directed towards Father Amadi, the young Nsukka priest. Having been educated to direct her attention away from bodiliness and to suppress her natural urges (as demonstrated by Eugene accusing Jaja of wanting the key to his own room with the sole purpose of masturbating), Kambili's approach to attraction is mostly indirect. In this regard, Eromosele states the following:

Thus, sexual intents and encounters between Kambili and Father Amadi are so toned down that they are almost unrecognisable as such. Adichie's attitude towards the depiction of sex is like that of a teenager who is at once fascinated with the idea and innocent about what it entails. She expresses deeply sexual emotions as if they do not proceed beyond the touching of hands.<sup>6</sup>

In point of fact, albeit not directly, Kambili's descriptions of Father Amadi and their encounters are laden with sensual imagery and unresolved sexual tension. While Amadi's reciprocation of Kambili's attraction is merely hinted at, her interest for him grows steadily throughout the novel and it is undoubtedly one of the catalysts of her transformation. Strict Catholicism has a censorious attitude towards sexuality in general, but even more so towards the sexuality of women, who must adhere to sexless principles of modesty and the purity myth at all times. Therefore, the depiction of Kambili as an active subject of desire, rather than merely its object, may be considered a subversively feminist element in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is indeed Father Amadi who is the object of this tentative, yet active desire, as is made evident by the physicality of scenes such as the following:

Father Amadi's car smelled like him, a clean scent that made me think of a clear azure sky. His shorts had seemed longer the last time I saw him in them, well past his knees. But now they climbed up to expose a muscular thigh sprinkled with dark hair. The space between us was too small, too tight. I was always a penitent when I was close to

6 Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," 103.

a priest at confession. But it was hard to feel penitent now, with Father Amadi's cologne deep in my lungs. I felt guilty because I could not focus on my sins, could not think of anything except how near he was. (PH, 174)

And also:

He reached out then and touched my hair. Mama had plaited it in the hospital, but because of my raging headaches, she did not make the braids tight. They were starting to slip out of the twists and Father Amadi ran his hand over the loosening braids, in gentle, smoothing motions. He was looking right into my eyes. He was too close. His touch was so light I wanted to push my head toward him, to feel the pressure of his hand. I wanted to collapse against him. I wanted to press his hand to my head, my belly, so he could feel the warmth that coursed through me. (PH, 226)

Once again, as she had done with Kambili's silence, it is Amaka who draws attention to the attraction between her and Amadi, going so far as to propose the possibility of optional celibacy in the priesthood and calling Kambili Amadi's 'sweetheart'. Amaka's boldness, however, is able to draw out words from Kambili herself:

"You have become Father Amadi's sweetheart," she said. Her tone was the same light tone she used with Obiora. She could not possibly know how painfully my heart lurched. "He was really worried when you were sick. He talked about you so much. And, *amam*, it wasn't just priestly concern." [...] Amaka turned to study my eager face. "You have a crush on him, don't you?" "Crush" was mild. It did not come close to what I felt, how I felt, but I said, "Yes." (PH, 219)

Ironically, while Eugene was quick to censor the possibility of sexual desire in Jaja, possibly not even contemplating it in Kambili's case, it is she who offers a vivid representation of attraction and desire.

The final opposition which will be taken into examination is between Beatrice and Ifeoma and concerns two examples of female experience. Beatrice and Ifeoma *de facto* represent, respectively, adherence to gender expectations to the point of personal harm and defiance of the same expectations, Beatrice is meek and co-dependent and Ifeoma is the head of her own household. In her 2015 article on *Purple Hibiscus*, Ibeku Ijeoma Ann states that Beatrice strives to adhere to the model of the 'good woman' according to its 'African conception'<sup>7</sup> and it is true that Beatrice is primarily represented as a weak woman who speaks in whispers and suffers her husband's beatings in silence. Furthermore, it appears that the only objects she possesses in her own home are the figurines on the *étagère* in the dining room, which are nevertheless the grim markers of a compulsive ritual which betrays the fragility of her emotional state. As a matter of fact, Beatrice is prone to meticulously cleaning the figurines after Eugene's bouts of

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7 Ibeku Ijeoma Ann. "Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the Issue of Feminism in African Novel," *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 5, no. 6 (June 2015).

violence:

Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door. Her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs, but I knew she went downstairs when I heard the dining room door open. I would go down to see her standing by the *étagère* with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them. (*PH*, 9-10)

The depiction of her dependency to Eugene also revolves around her ability to become pregnant. Indeed, Beatrice seems to excuse Eugene's violence in light of his generosity for keeping her as a wife even though she had not birthed him more than two children:

"Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go?" She did not wait for Aunty Ifeoma to respond. "Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying a bride price?" (*PH*, 250)

It is soon evident, however, that it is not Beatrice who cannot carry a pregnancy to term, but rather Eugene who will beat her to the point of causing miscarriage, as is narrated twice in the novel.

While on a surface level Beatrice incarnates the model of the passive woman, who quietly accepts her suffering, Ifeoma is shown to be radically different, an outspoken, strong woman whose sole presence fills a room. The description of her arrival in the Achike house in Abba accurately captures the fullness of her personality:

Aunty Ifeoma drove into the compound just as we finished breakfast. When she barged into the dining room upstairs, I imagined a proud ancient forebear, walking miles to fetch water in homemade clay pots, nursing babies until they walked and talked, fighting wars with machetes sharpened on sun-warmed stone. She filled a room. (*PH*, 79)

Ifeoma is her own person and acts according to her own rules, as demonstrated by the fact that she would rather live as a widow in relative poverty than live a more affluent life on her brother's terms:

"Have you forgotten that Eugene offered to buy me a car, even before Ifediora died? But first he wanted us to join the Knights of St. John. He wanted us to send Amaka to convent school. He even wanted me to stop wearing makeup! I want a new car, *nwunye m*, and I want to use my gas cooker again and I want a new freezer and I want money so that I will not have to unravel the seams of Chima's trousers when he outgrows them. But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things." (*PH*, 95)

Ifeoma is an independent, uncontrollable figure, who decides to reject both her brother's tyrannical rule and the authoritarian demise of her university, even at the cost of

suffering the consequences. She, nevertheless, maintains a tight bond with Beatrice, encouraging her to leave Eugene. It is this bond that demonstrates how two different modes of experiencing womanhood and the difficulties that may arise need not be mutually exclusive, especially in light of the subversive depths lurking under the surface of Beatrice's character. Indeed, while Ifeoma openly contests what she deems unjust, Beatrice cannot speak up at the risk of suffering bodily harm and, thus, she appears to be consistently submissive throughout the whole novel. However, in a dramatic turn of events following Eugene's sudden death, it is Beatrice herself who reveals with a shocking simplicity that she poisoned him with the help of one of the other silent minor characters in the novel, their maid Sisi:

"They did an autopsy," she said. "They have found the poison in your father's body." She sounded as though the poison in Papa's body was something we had all known about, something we had put in there to be found, the way it was done in the books I read where white people hid Easter eggs for their children to find. [...] When she spoke, her voice was just as calm and slow. "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor." (PH, 290)

The irony in Eugene's demise is double, insofar as not only was this violent patriarch violently ended by the cooperation of two women, one seemingly insignificant servant and the other his wife and victim, but his death was brought on by those traditions he so vehemently abhorred. Beatrice, thus, appears to be possibly even more subversive than Ifeoma, since her rebellion is violent and caused by the impossibility of maintaining the façade of the 'good woman' at the cost of her own personal safety.

#### ***4.2 Half of a Yellow Sun***

Adichie's second novel, winner of the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, and shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, was first published by Fourth Estate in 2006. *Half of a Yellow Sun* follows the characters' lives in the years prior to and during the Nigeria-Biafra conflict of 1967-1970 and, as such, it is a historical novel about the human experience of war. While openly sympathizing with the Biafran cause, Adichie never romanticizes war. Instead, her aim is to depict the fullness of humanity even in times of despair, thus choosing to represent "the *grittiness* of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life."<sup>8</sup>

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8 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience", 50-51.

Following the political instability in the wake of Nigeria's first military coup in 1966 and the growing anti-Igbo sentiment in the same year, whereby "a spate of massacres, many conducted by northern soldiers, took the lives of between 80,000 and 100,000 easterners",<sup>9</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, governor of the Eastern region, had urged all the Igbo residing outside of Igboland to return. Meanwhile, a counter-coup in the same year had brought Lieutenant Colonel Yakubu Gowon to power as the new head of state. On May 30 1967 the Eastern region seceded from Nigeria under Ojukwu's guidance and declared itself the Independent Republic of Biafra. As Gowon could not accept the region's secession, considering "the lands claimed by Biafra contained 67 percent of the known petroleum reserves in Nigeria" (175), war was declared and the conflict was protracted until 1970, ending with Biafra's surrender and inevitable collapse. The Nigeria-Biafra conflict gathered international attention in part because of the "economic strangulation"(176) enforced by Gowon, which led to the starvation of millions, especially children, and through the images of infants bloated by kwashiorkor which circulated worldwide. The final toll of the conflict is estimated to have taken the lives of "between 1 and 3 million Nigerians, mostly in the Eastern Region and many through starvation" (179).

Within the novel, perspective on these events is split between three main characters, thus articulating three categories of experience. The first is that of Ugwu, a young and poor boy who is sent to Nsukka to serve as a houseboy in the home of Odenigbo, a university professor. The second perspective is that of Olanna, the wealthy daughter of Chief Ozobia, who, despite her parents' disapproval, chooses to be with Odenigbo in Nsukka and work as a lecturer. The third and final perspective is that of the aspiring writer Richard, a white British man from the upper-middle class who moves to Nigeria in search of inspiration for his writing, fascinated by the archeological findings in Igbo-Ukwu. These three characters offer insight into the experience of different classes and groups of people during the war, specifically as to what it meant to be a poor young boy forced to join the Biafran army in Ugwu's case, the condition of the collapsing Biafran middle-class and what it meant for women in Olanna's case, and the attempt by a well-meaning white man to espouse the Biafran cause and himself identify as Biafran in Richard's case.

One of the central themes of *Half of a Yellow Sun* is undoubtedly sexuality, which is

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9 Falola and Heaton, *A History of Nigeria*, 173-174.

no longer merely hinted at as in *Purple Hibiscus*, but is explicitly present throughout the text. Sex and sexual desire are part of the "grittiness of being human" and, as such, they are indicators of the fullness of human experience. With 'fullness' of experience I refer not only to the diverse, complex elements that construct human experience, but especially the more primal, common elements, which the sexual sphere pertains to. Sexuality knows no boundaries of class, gender, ethnicity or race, it is the one common denominator amongst all the characters in the novel. In this regard, Eromosele states, "In a world of characters from very diverse ethnicities and nationalities, sex becomes a common denominator. It is one of the few things which they all, in spite of their many differences, have in common."<sup>10</sup> Consensual sex also plays an important role insofar as it represents an intimate, safe space removed from the horrors of the conflict. In Zoë Norrige's words:

Sex [...] is repeatedly figured as pleasurable, supportive, loving, and empowering. It also plays an integral role in the characters' response to the onset of war. [...] Sex here is pictured as a haven, a space for joy in the midst of tragedy.<sup>11</sup>

An example from the novel of the ritualistic, reassuring power of consensual sex may be found in an excerpt regarding Richard and Kainene, Olanna's twin sister:

They would go out to the veranda and he would push the table aside and spread out the soft rug and lie on his naked back. When she climbed astride, he would hold her hips and stare up at the night sky and, for those moments, be sure of the meaning of bliss. It was their new ritual since the war started, the only reason he was grateful for the war.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, while sexual contact and desire are depicted as fundamental means of human connection even in adversity, there is nonetheless a shifting aspect to love and sex, an ability to parallel the changes in a relationship and in the larger social context of war. Indeed, in the case of Olanna and Odenigbo, for example, sex signals the phases and bumps in their relationship, from the idyll of Olanna's first move to Nsukka to Odenigbo's betrayal by sleeping with Amala, his mother's servant girl. Olanna's revenge is consummated on a sexual level as well, as she sleeps half-drunkenly with Richard. The consequences of war also appear in the realm of sexuality, with Olanna noting Odenigbo's thin, shrunken form and the new desperation in their lovemaking. It is precisely in this scene, when Olanna has learned of the death of their friend Okeoma,

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10 Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 103.

11 Zoë Norrige. "Sex as Synecdoche: Intimate Languages of Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*," *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 28.

12 Adichie. *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 385-386. Henceforth all quotes from the text will be referred to as *HYS* in parenthesis, in the text, and followed by page numbers.

the revolutionary poet, that "through language steeped in physicality"<sup>13</sup> the reader has tactile access to the characters' raw emotion and to their transformation:

Olanna reached out and grasped Odenigbo's arm and the screams came out of her, screeching, piercing screams, because something in her head was stretched taut. Because she felt attacked, relentlessly clobbered, by loss. She did not let go of his arm until Dr Nwala stumbled back into the rain, until they climbed silently onto their mattress on the floor. When he slid into her, she thought how different he felt, lighter and narrower, on top of her. He was still, so still she thrashed around and pulled at his hips. But he did not move. Then he began to thrust and her pleasure multiplied, sharpened on stone so that each tiny spark became a pleasure all its own. She heard herself crying, her sobbing louder and louder until Baby stirred and he placed his palm against her mouth. He was crying too; she felt the tears drop on her body before she saw them on his face. (*HYS*, 490)

Sex, therefore, may function as a physical marker of the common humanity of the characters, a tool of betrayal (thus positing itself as a metaphor for the multiple levels of betrayal in the novel, e.g. Nigeria's betrayal of the Igbo people),<sup>14</sup> and an indicator of the shifting nature of relationships in response to external stimuli. As Norrige states:

If Adichie returns to descriptions of sexual intercourse between Olanna and Odenigbo, Kainene and Richard so frequently over the course of the novel, it is partly to explore the changing nature of their relationships: to focus around a repeated act – weighty in its intimacy – which is transformed by the conflict situation.<sup>15</sup>

The theme of sexual coercion by men equally permeates the novel and its effects are shared among women of both upper and lower classes, although the text offers a disproportionate amount of depictions of poor girls and women being victims of abuse. In point of fact, from very early on Olanna is presented as having begrudgingly grown accustomed to receiving unwanted attention and touching by men from her same societal circles: "She was used to this, being grabbed by men who walked around in a cloud of cologne-drenched entitlement, with the presumption that, because they were powerful and found her beautiful, they belonged together" (*HYS*, 41). The situation is sensibly worsened by the fact that, more often than not, Olanna's own parents are the ones who present her as sexually available to powerful men in exchange for favors and contracts. Kainene, who does not share her twin sister's same beauty and is thus deemed a less desirable candidate, is the one to explicitly illustrate the process for the reader:

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13 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 33.

14 "Northerners betray their Igbo neighbours and friends by killing them in an orgy of massacres... Biafra betrays Nigeria by its act of secession, and the Nigerian government betrays the Igbo living in the North by refusing to prosecute or punish the rampaging Northerners guilty of the crimes. The Yoruba betray the Igbo by harassing and even killing the Igbo among them in Lagos. And inside Biafra stories of saboteurs, real or imagined are rampant." Charles Nnolim, as quoted by Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 104.

15 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 32.

She was almost asleep when Kainene knocked. 'So will you be spreading your legs for that elephant in exchange for Daddy's contract?' Kainene asked. [...] 'Daddy literally pulled me away from the veranda, so we could leave you alone with the good cabinet minister,' Kainene said. 'Will he give Daddy the contract then?' [...] 'The benefit of being the ugly daughter is that nobody uses you as sex bait.' (*HYS*, 43)

Women from the middle-to-upper classes, however, appear to enjoy a more sexually liberated lifestyle than many of their lower class counterparts, for whom sexual activity may consist of a quick tumble in the dark, as for Chinyere, or may be a trauma wrought onto them, as for Amala and Eberechi. The case of Chinyere, a house-girl, and her tryst with Ugwu is especially interesting because, while they are both consenting to sexual intercourse with one another, both project fantasies of other imagined or past lovers onto their nightly meetings. For both, sex transcends the merely physical sensation to function as "a mnemonic – as a physical experience that opens up pathways to the past, as a trigger for emotion and the recounting of history."<sup>16</sup> It is so that Ugwu's coupling with Chinyere, whom he does not speak to during the day and even hardly speaks to during intercourse, is described thus:

There was something moist about the darkness, about their bodies close together, and he imagined that she was Nnesinachi and that the taut legs encircling him were Nnesinachi's. She was silent at first and then, hips thrashing, her hands tight around his back, she called out the same thing she said every time. It sounded like a name – Abonyi, Abonyi – but he wasn't sure. Perhaps she imagined that he was someone else too, someone back in her village. (*HYS*, 160-161)

Hence, for both Chinyere and Ugwu, sex in their context (i.e. removed from their villages to serve in a more affluent household) serves as "a settlement for substitutes, a temporary filling of the space which only the absent desired can fill."<sup>17</sup> The reason for this use of sex as a trigger for emotional memory may be found not only in Chinyere and Ugwu's material displacement from home, but also in the growing instability of their time, as suggested by Eromosele:

In a period where the familiar world is falling apart and losing all sense of order, the characters resort to the one thing they have control over, the one excitement that is created of their own volition and with the merging of bodies aflame with passion and not bombs and bullets.<sup>18</sup>

However, Chinyere's settling for a sexual substitute is nevertheless a demonstration of her agency in sexual choices, whereas this same agency is denied to characters such as Amala and Eberechi. Amala, the young servant girl of Odenigbo's mother, is coerced by

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16 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 31.

17 Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie", 105.

18 Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie."

the latter to engage in sexual intercourse with Odenigbo while he is in a drunken stupor (and, poignantly, cannot himself express clear consent) and, later on, to carry a pregnancy to term. Amala's role in Mama's plan is pitifully passive as she is only able to respond 'yes' or 'no' to her and do as she is told. That she is merely acquiescing out of the belief that she has no alternative is made explicit when, at the early stages of her pregnancy, she attempts to self-abort:

The afternoon after Mama left, Ugwu found Amala in the vegetable garden, crouched on the ground with her knees drawn up, arms around her legs. She was chewing peppers. [...] Amala said nothing for a while; she spoke so seldom that her voice always surprised Ugwu by how childishly high it was. 'Pepper can remove pregnancy,' she said. [...] 'If you eat plenty of hot peppers, they will remove pregnancy.' She was huddled in the mud like a pathetic animal, chewing slowly, tears streaming down her face. [...] Her face was slick with the moisture of tears and mucus, and once in a while she opened her mouth and extended her pepper-burned tongue to pant like a dog. He wanted to ask why she had gone along with it if she did not want the baby. (*HYS*, 299-300)

Subsequently, after Baby is born, Amala shows the same sense of silent detachment, prompting Olanna to ultimately reflect on the girl's position of complete subordination to both Mama and Odenigbo:

Finally, she turned her face towards them and Olanna looked at her: a plain village girl curled up on the bed as if she were cringing from one more furious blow from life. She never once looked at Odenigbo. What she must feel for him was an awed fear. Whether or not Mama had told her to go to his room, she had not said no to Odenigbo because she had not even considered that she could say no. Odenigbo made a drunken pass and she submitted willingly and promptly: He was the master, he spoke English, he had a car. It was the way it should be. [...] How much did one know of the true feelings of those who did not have a voice? (*HYS*, 312-313)

It was thus Amala's profound sense of her context and her place in society which led her to acquiesce to sex, a begrudging acceptance and use to subjugation.

Similarly, Eberechi, Ugwu and Olanna's neighbor in Umuahia, is also made a victim by her social position, as her parents were wont to offer her to visiting army officials and officers, like an object to be shared and exchanged. Eberechi's history of sexual abuse is so integral to her as a character that it is mentioned within her first appearance in the novel:

He had heard the neighbours talking about her; the story was that her parents had given her to a visiting army officer, as one would give kola nut to a guest. They had knocked on his door at night, opened it, and gently pushed her in. The next morning, the beaming officer thanked her beaming parents while Eberechi stood by. Ugwu watched her go back indoors and wondered how she had felt about being offered to a stranger and what had happened after she was pushed into his room and who was to blame more, her parents or the officer. (*HYS*, 249-250)

It is only in a further passage, when she and Ugwu have established a bond of trust and affection, that she is given space to finally tell her own story:

'He had a big belly,' she said, in a detached tone. 'He did it quickly and then told me to lie on top of him. He fell asleep and I wanted to move away and he woke me up and told me to stay there. I could not sleep so the whole night I looked at the saliva coming down the side of his mouth.' She paused. 'He helped us. He put my brother in essential services in the army.' (HYS, 369)

Eberechi also serves as an example of how rape becomes a widespread phenomenon in a society with a strong power imbalance, such as Biafran and Nigerian societies under military rule during the war. On a wider scale, far from its traditional association to an aberrant sexual deviance, Susan Brownmiller identified rape in her 1975 *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* as "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men keep all women* in a state of fear."<sup>19</sup> Rape is, therefore, not a process through which sexual desire is forcibly imposed by one willing party unto an unwilling other, but rather an act of power whereby one party actively seeks to sexually humiliate the other by exploiting their vulnerability. As such, it may even be stated that rape is synonymous with the imperialist approach to foreign politics. This is made even more explicit in the general conception of rape in wartime: a war crime, but nevertheless felt as though it inevitably happens to some degree. Brownmiller elaborates the concept thus:

It's funny about *man's* attitude toward rape in war. *Unquestionably* there shall be some raping. Unconscionable, but nevertheless inevitable. When men are men, slugging it out amongst themselves, conquering new land, subjugating new people, driving on toward victory, *unquestionably* there will be some raping. (31)

The men who carry out these acts, army officials, simple soldiers, etc., are "ordinary Joes, made unordinary by entry into the most exclusive male-only club in the world" (32). Belonging to an army provides the sense of entitlement and power which is fundamental as a catalyst toward rape. This last concept is elaborated in *Half of a Yellow Sun* through the gang rape scene on a Biafran woman at the hands of Biafran soldiers, one of whom is Ugwu. What is especially striking about this act is that it is from the start explicitly framed as being a show of power on the part of the soldiers, even if the rape targets 'one of their own'. Aside from the obvious denigration of the woman's dignity and personhood the act implies, the violation is perceived as a profound act of male bonding for the soldiers, who are routinely stripped of power and

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19 Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1975), 15.

agency in the hierarchical structure of the army. Rape thus constitutes a moment of bonding over the shared power over an 'inferior'. Even Ugwu, who initially resists taking part in the rape, is ultimately pressed to conform to the group, only to be overcome by an unshakeable sense of self-loathing immediately after having abused the girl:

On the floor, the girl was still. Ugwu pulled his trousers down, surprised at the swiftness of his erection. She was dry and tense when he entered her. He did not look at her face, or at the man pinning her down, or at anything at all as he moved quickly and felt his own climax, the rush of fluids to the tips of himself: a self-loathing release. He zipped up his trousers while some soldiers clapped. Finally he looked at the girl. She stared back at him with a calm hate. (*HYS*, 458)

Poignantly, the scene is particularly haunting not only because Ugwu is one of the main narrators of the novel and the narrative focalization has so far brought the reader to experience parts of the plot through him, but also because the character of the girl resists the possibility of this graphic scene amounting to mere 'torture-porn' (i.e. the objectification and sexualization of acts of violence and exploitation) by staring back. The girl is not merely the object of abuse, her gaze turns back on the perpetrators, making her subjectivity undeniable even in the face of extreme humiliation and violence.

Rape is thus presented as "a bonding male exercise in the practise of war."<sup>20</sup> However, rape by soldiers is not the only form of sexual coercion referenced in the novel. Indeed, sexual abuse is present amongst those categories of people whose purpose is to assist and provide aid to refugees, but who, instead, choose to exploit their privileged position to force young girls into sex. Such is the case of Father Marcel, one of the white priests who assist Kainene in aiding the sick, the dispossessed, and the wounded in a refugee camp, a priest who abuses children in exchange for food and medicine:

'Can you believe who is responsible for that small girl Urenwa's pregnancy?' Kainene asked, and Ugwu almost did not recognize her. Her eyes bulged out of her angular face, filled with rage and tears. 'Can you believe it is Father Marcel?' [...] 'Apparently I've been blind; she's not the only one,' Kainene said. 'He fucks most of them before he gives them the crayfish that I slave to get here!' (*HYS*, 498)

Such a phenomenon may be connected to two myths present in white societies, that of the willing victim and the interlinking of suffering and sexuality in Western representation of Africa (not altogether different in purpose from the 'torture porn'

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20 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 26.

referenced earlier). In regards to the first myth, Norrige claims that "the shame involved in rape is linked to social myths about female rape victims 'seducing' men, the socially circulating idea that the victim in some way draws pleasure from rape results in guilt and silence."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the idea that the depiction of suffering bodies may be often framed through the visual language of desire is also elaborated by Norrige, who references Susan Sontag's work:

As I return to Sontag now, I see a more deliberate intention to her interjection. She later goes on to claim that "all images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic" (85). Read in conjunction with that assertion we could argue that when Sontag refers to Africa's "sexy music," this is not in opposition to Africa as a locus of victimhood in the international imaginary. Instead, sexuality and awareness of suffering are intricately interlinked. The networked global audience, accustomed to viewing various African bodies through news channels, films, and photography experience an attraction to such bodies not only in terms of a tug of human sympathy (ineffective though, Sontag argues, that may be) but also through the frame of desire. [...] The intention to assist is steeped in physical desire.<sup>22</sup>

So, too, to a certain extent, is the intention to bear witness to the horrors of the conflict, as exemplified by Richard's encounter with the American reporters. Their purpose in the novel, with their detached attitudes and blatant, casual racism, is arguably to show the *scopophilia* inherent in Western societies' view of the Nigeria-Biafra war, the contingent nature of the West's interest in the conflict. The redheaded journalist, always at one with his camera, demonstrates how outer perception of the war is filtered through the lens of drama and spectacle, even at the cost of ignoring reality:

The redhead walked across quickly, the camera around his neck swinging as he moved. 'I want to see the real Biafrans,' he said. 'The real Biafrans?' Richard asked. 'I mean, look at them. They can't have eaten a meal in two years. I don't see how they can still talk about the cause and Biafra and Ojunkwu.' 'Do you usually decide what answers you will believe before you do an interview?' Richard asked mildly. (*HYS*, 464)

Just a few pages earlier, both reporters are shown to feed into the myth of all women being sexually available at all times (thus implicitly supporting the idea of a consenting victim):

'She looked like she was real interested,' the plump one said. 'I hear there's a lot of free sex here. But the girls have some kind of sexually transmitted disease? The Bonny disease? You guys have to be careful so you don't take anything back home.' [...] The redhead had been staring out of the window; he turned now towards Richard. 'I had an English friend at college who really went for coloured girls.' (*HYS*, 462)

Aside from the concept of "free sex", which does not evoke the image of consensual intercourse, but rather that of an object easily available to any passing white man, what

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21 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 27-28.

22 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 22.

is especially interesting in this passage is the racist, exotic filter that is applied on to the supposedly willing Biafran woman. Hence, it is not all women everywhere who are sexually disposable, but the exotic women in the warzone, who are represented as an intriguing fetish (the redhead's friend "really went for coloured girls") with an exciting risk (i.e. contracting the Bonny disease, which, according to the plump reporter, all Biafran women have).

While *Half of a Yellow Sun* does undoubtedly abound with graphic descriptions of sexual abuse, it is noteworthy to mention also the problematic nature of Ugwu's initially innocent approach to sexuality and the female body. My contention in this regard is that, aside from the group rape which consciously brought him to a sense of self-loathing and repentance, the depiction of Ugwu's desire and his relations to the women he either desires or loves shows inherent, barely explicit instances of objectification of the female body, sexualization of violence, and even ignorance of the basis of consent. Indeed, Ugwu's character arc shows him growing from a young teenager to a man and, so too, his consideration of women evolves. Nevertheless, it is useful to note the different elements of this representation. Objectification is without doubt a staple in the presentation of Ugwu's desire: he fantasizes about Nnesinachi's breasts in almost every mention of her character, for example, and his view of Eberechi is constantly referencing her buttocks. As a matter of fact, Ugwu's description of Eberechi's buttocks upon her first appearance in the novel is prior even to the mention of her name: "Ugwu knew the young woman. He had first noticed her because of how perfectly rounded her buttocks were, how they rolled rhythmically, from side to side, as she walked. Her name was Eberechi" (*HYS*, 250). Moreover, despite himself, Ugwu finds he is unable to resist the rush of arousal that accompanied her retelling the story of her sexual abuse by an officer: "Ugwu looked away. He felt angry that she had gone through what she had, and he felt angry with himself because the story had involved imagining her naked and had aroused him" (*HYS*, 369). Finally, in an earlier passage, under the mistaken assumption that tear gas could be used to induce a sleep-like state on a single person, Ugwu is shown to wish he could procure some in order to use it on Nnesinachi and thus have access to her body while her mind sleeps:

The tear gas fascinated Ugwu. If it made people pass out, he wanted to get it. He wanted to use it on Nnesinachi when he went home with Mr Richard for the *ori-okpa* festival. He would lead her to the grove by the stream and tell her the tear gas was a magic spray that would keep her healthy. She would believe him. She would be so impressed to see him arrive in a white man's car that she would believe anything he

said. (HYS, 262)

While the scene is undoubtedly framed by Ugwu's ignorance of the gravity of inducing lack of consciousness onto a person for his own benefit, it nevertheless demonstrates profound misinformation on the fundamental importance of women's consent to sexual acts.

In light of the abundance of portrayals of violence, exploitation, and sexual coercion in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, it may be stated that the representation of consensual sex within the novel acquires yet another status. Indeed, the depiction of consensual sex in conjunction to scenes of sexual violence may offset by contrast potential interpretations of rape victims as willing. A direct example from the novel is when Olanna learns of her cousin Arize's brutal violation and murder, which is juxtaposed to Olanna and Odenigbo's lovemaking:

'Touch me.' She knew he didn't want to, that he touched her breasts because he would do whatever she wanted, whatever would make her better. She caressed his neck, buried her fingers in his dense hair, and when he slid into her, she thought about Arize's pregnant belly, how easily it must have broken, skin stretched that taut. She started to cry. (HYS, 201)

As Norridge points out, such a scene not only introduces the horror of Arize's murder through Olanna's identification and the contrast between the violence and the lovemaking, it also foregrounds an image of consensual sex against that of rape, shattering by contrast the myth of the willing victim. Consensual sex thus serves as a reminder of the humanity and participatory nature of intercourse against the brutality and inhumanity of rape. Norridge elaborates in the following manner:

The mutual desire and participation we see in Kai and Nenebah [from *The Memory of Love* by Aminatta Forna], Olanna and Odenigbo, and Richard and Kainene's relations make it abundantly clear by contrast that in descriptions of sexual violence the person who is violated in no way desires the violation, is in no way complicit with her or his own rape.<sup>23</sup>

A further theme which is central to the novel is that of the twins and their bond. Olanna and Kainene's relationship is initially shown as ruptured, a deeply emotional, almost telepathic symbiosis which withered through time. Throughout the course of the text their arc will bring them to deepen their conflict through Olanna's drunken tryst with Richard and, ultimately, towards reconciliation in the face of the dangers of war. Olanna's descriptions of her lost connection with Kainene appear to echo Kambili's depiction of her own connection with Jaja in *Purple Hibiscus*, i.e. the ability to

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23 Norridge, "Sex as Synecdoche," 28.

communicate through eyes and thoughts alone:

Olanna wished she still had those flashes, moments when she could tell what Kainene was thinking. When they were in primary school, they sometimes looked at each other and laughed, without speaking, because they were thinking the same joke. She doubted that Kainene ever had those flashes now, since they never talked about such things any more. They never talked about anything any more. (*HYS*, 38)

Additionally, each sister represents a different approach to the female experience and femininity, especially in terms of physical appearance, personal agency, and assertion. In Olanna's case, 'beautiful' is perhaps the most commonly occurring attribute used to describe her. Indeed, Olanna's beauty is extraordinary, making her the object of desire of many men in the novel, including the poet Okeoma and even Richard. However, as stated by Adichie, Olanna's beauty does nothing to help her personally, "beauty doesn't solve anybody's problem"<sup>24</sup> and Olanna is at times even victimized by it, becoming the "sex bait" her father offers to other Big Men. Nevertheless, being the object of so much desire does not stop Olanna from expressing desire of her own, as a subject rather than an object, and the representation of her sexuality reflects it. In point of fact, it is often she who initiates intercourse with Odenigbo and the depiction of her desire is explicit, e.g.:

She unbuckled his trousers. She did not let him take them off. She turned her back and leaned on the wall and guided him into her, excited by his surprise, by his firm hands on her hips. She knew she should lower her voice because of Ugwu and Baby in the next room and yet she had no control over her own moans, over the raw primal pleasure she felt in wave after wave that ended with both of them leaning against the wall, gasping and giggling. (*HYS*, 353)

Olanna is without doubt a character with agency, who strives for independence and self-actualization, striving to reject the privileges afforded her by her lineage and choosing instead a poorer life as a lecturer alongside Odenigbo. She initially resists both marriage and motherhood as potentially limiting experiences and only accepts them at her own choosing, even at Odenigbo's insistence:

Still, when Olanna lay in bed with Odenigbo, legs intertwined, it would strike her how her life in Nsukka felt like being immersed in a mesh of soft feathers, even on the days when Odenigbo locked himself in the study for hours. Each time he suggested they get married, she said no. They were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that bond; she feared that marriage would flatten it to a prosaic partnership. (*HYS*, 64)

Moreover, despite her anguish in not becoming pregnant and her profound pain at Odenigbo's betrayal with Amala, Olanna is able to accept an unconventional motherhood by adopting Amala's child as her own, which Kainene herself then

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24 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 0:58.

commends as a brave decision:

'We'll keep her,' Olanna said. She startled herself by how clearly she had articulated the desire to keep the baby and how it felt right. It was as if it was what she had always wanted to do. [...] She had not felt sorry for the child. Instead, holding that tiny, warm body, she had felt a conscious serendipity, a sense that this may not have been planned but had become, the minute it happened, what was meant to be. (*HYS*, 314)

Despite her agency as a character, however, Olanna still consciously suffers from a lack of assertion, which, conversely, she perceives Kainene to have. One such instance is exemplified in Olanna's thoughts before confronting her father about his infidelity: "Kainene was the best person for this. Kainene would know exactly what to say and would not feel the awkward ineptness that she did now, Kainene with her sharp edges and her bitter tongue and her supreme confidence" (*HYS*, 271-272). Olanna's lack of assertion, however, is manifest in her relationship with Odenigbo. Olanna is able to momentarily leave him following his infidelity, she is able to sleep with Richard as an act of revenge towards him, yet she remains remarkably swayed by Odenigbo and his will. She herself makes the nature of her love for him explicit in the following passage:

He was making her feel small and absurdly petulant and, worse yet, she suspected he was right. For a brief irrational moment, she wished she could walk away from him. Then she wished, more rationally, that she could love him without needing him. Need gave him power without his trying; need was the choicelessness she often felt around him. (*HYS*, 127-128)

Olanna's neighbor in her Nsukka flat, Edna, provides further insight into her lack of assertiveness: "Look at you. You're the kindest person I know. Look how beautiful you are. Why do you need so much outside of yourself? Why isn't what you are enough? You're so damned weak!" (*HYS*, 290). In her typically terse manner, Kainene also comments of Olanna's weakness towards Odenigbo:

'I can't stand him. I can't stand him close to me.' 'Good,' Kainene said. [...] 'Yes, good. There's something very lazy about the way you have loved him blindly for so long without ever criticizing him. You've never even accepted that the man is ugly.' (*HYS*, 485)

Kainene, on the other hand, is immediately presented as a reversal of her sister. Not beautiful, she does not strive to please, but prefers to live life completely on her own terms. Kainene is unapologetically Adichie's favorite character in the novel, precisely because of her uncompromising nature:

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* I just deeply adored Kainene. I loved that she was this woman who just lived life on her own terms and was willing to be sarcastic when she wanted

to be, so I really admired her. I mean, I made her, but I really admired her.<sup>25</sup>

The first mention of Kainene in Richard's perspective illustrates how she defies stereotypes of high-society acceptability and is freely brazen and confident in her appearance:

He didn't think Kainene was some wealthy Nigerian's daughter because she had none of the cultivated demureness. She seemed more like a mistress: her brazenly red lipstick, her tight dress, her smoking. But then she didn't smile in that plastic way the mistresses did. She didn't even have the generic prettiness that made him inclined to believe the rumor that Nigerian politicians swapped mistresses. In fact, she was not pretty at all. (*HYS*, 70)

Additionally, Kainene has the ability to voice blunt truths in a casual, detached way, unlike her sister. Nonetheless, sarcasm and a terse speech are not the only attributes Kainene may be associated with, as she also provides one of the more scintillating examples of female rage and authority in the novel. It takes place after the discovery of Father Marcel's abuse of the young girls and is told through Ugwu's eyes:

Later, Ugwu watched Kainene push at Father Marcel's chest with both hands, shouting into his face, shoving him so hard that Ugwu feared the man would fall. '*Amosu! You devil!*' Then she turned to Father Jude. 'How could you stay here and let him spread the legs of starving girls? How will you account for this to your God? You are both leaving now, right now. I will take this to Ojunkwu myself if I have to!' There were tears running down her face. There was something magnificent in her rage. (*HYS*, 498)

What is perhaps the most intriguing feature about Kainene, however, is how she is ultimately unknowable. She is never the narrator within the novel, but rather appears mostly through the eyes of Richard or Olanna, who never quite seem to know her mind. Olanna remarks early in the text on their lost connection, while Richard appears to strive to possess her without ever fully succeeding. Aside from his explicit comments on not being able to discern her thoughts or intentions, sexual intercourse is once again a powerful metaphor. Interestingly, Richard is afflicted by impotence in almost all the sexual encounters between himself and Kainene, appearing instead at his most sexually powerful in his illicit tryst with Olanna. Indeed, sex between Richard and Kainene emerges as the realization of distance, as noted by Norrige:

It is through the intimacy of the sexual encounter that the irreconcilable distance of the other person is realized. [...] The clarity of perception that sexual intimacy yields is here not any unforeseen knowledge of the other person, but instead the realization of an inaccessible distance.<sup>26</sup>

In fact, sex does not appear to aid Richard in his quest for the possession of Kainene's

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25 "Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 4:26.

26 Norrige, "Sex as Synecdoche," 23.

mind, the ultimate knowledge of her:

She was mostly inscrutable, watching, drinking, smoking. He ached to know what she was thinking. He felt a similar physical pain when he desired her, and he would dream about being inside her, thrusting as deep as he could, to try and discover something that he knew he never would. It was like drinking glass after glass of water and still emerging thirsty, and with the stirring fear that he would never quench the thirst. (*HYS*, 81)

The final key to the unknowable nature of Kainene, however, resides in her disappearance behind enemy lines towards the end of the novel. It is to that, just as she was consistently presented as out of grasp, her exit mirrors the mystery of her character, as neither Olanna nor Richard will ever know what became of her.

### ***4.3 The Thing Around Your Neck***

Adichie's only collection of short stories to date, *The Thing Around Your Neck* was first published in 2009 by Fourth Estate. The text gathers twelve short stories, many of which had already been published as standalones in journals and magazines. Prominent themes include discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion and women either willingly or by necessity being displaced from home. Indeed, *The Thing Around Your Neck* is the first major work by Adichie to heavily include the United States as a setting. Moreover, it is also her first work to feature representations of homosexuality and same-sex desire, which are relevant to feminist engagement in an intersectional approach. In point of fact, Adichie's stance on homosexuality and, more generally, LGBTQ issues reflects the intersectional concern of inclusion of difference within the framework. Not only does the text offer realistic, humane depictions of non-heterosexual individuals years prior to the passing of the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2013, but Adichie's explicit comment on the passing of the Act offers insight into her accepting approach. The Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act was a bill based on an earlier 2006 proposal which passed into legislation in Nigeria in 2013. The Act's 'Explanatory Memorandum' efficiently summarizes the purpose of the law: "This Act prohibits a marriage contract or civil union entered into between persons of same sex, and provides penalties for the solemnisation and witnessing of same thereof."<sup>27</sup> Penalties may include incarceration for as long as ten years. Adichie's response to the passing of the bill consisted in the publishing, on 18 February 2014, of

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27 National Assembly of Nigeria. *Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act*, 2013, accessed on May 20, 2017, <<http://www.placng.org/new/laws/Same%20Sex%20Marriage%20%28Prohibition%29%20Act,%202013.pdf>>

the article "Chimamanda Adichie: Why can't he just be like everyone else?" on *The Scoop*, a Nigerian online news outlet. Herein, she defines the contours of the unfairness of the law, deemed unjust because of its targeting a minority while showing a complete lack of acceptance of "benign difference":

We cannot be a just society unless we are able to accommodate benign difference, accept benign difference, live and let live. We may not understand homosexuality, we may find it personally abhorrent but our response cannot be to criminalize it. A crime is a crime for a reason. A crime has victims. A crime harms society. On what basis is homosexuality a crime? Adults do no harm to society in how they love and whom they love. This is a law that will not prevent crime, but will, instead, lead to crimes of violence: there are already, in different parts of Nigeria, attacks on people 'suspected' of being gay.<sup>28</sup>

As with feminism, Adichie proceeds to reject the idea of homosexuality being an import from the West and, thus, somehow 'un-African'. Her approach is once again to normalize difference, as already referenced in *Dear Ijeawele*, since difference is merely "the reality of our world."<sup>29</sup> Hence, what is perhaps the most interesting feature in the representation of homosexuality in *The Thing Around Your Neck* is its setting in context, its intersection with a variety of other issues (e.g. sexism, diaspora, racism, etc.), out of which it emerges as a simple fact of life. Homosexuality is never made the main focus of any of the stories in which it appears, but merely presented as a side to a certain character or other in a multifaceted reality.

In this section, four short stories will be examined in accordance to two analytical frameworks, i.e. the normalization of same-sex desire and colonial and post-colonial sexism. The stories herein considered are "The Shivering", "On Monday of Last Week", "Jumping Monkey Hill", and "The Headstrong Historian".

As far as the first of the two frameworks is concerned, "The Shivering" contains the text's only example of male homosexuality, incarnated in Chinedu, who is not the novella's main character, but who is instead viewed through the eyes of the actual protagonist, Ukamaka. At a surface level, this short story revolves around Ukamaka's heartbreak after the end of her tumultuous relationship with Udenna, who she initially fears had fallen victim in the October 2005 plane crash in Lagos, which counted 117 total victims.<sup>30</sup> The crash nevertheless serves as a narrative pretext to bring Ukamaka

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28 Adichie. "Chimamanda Adichie: Why can't he just be like everyone else?" *The Scoop*, February 18, 2014, accessed on May 20, 2017, <<http://www.thescoopng.com/2014/02/18/chimamanda-adichie-why-cant-he-just-be-like-everyone-else/>>

29 Adichie. *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 395.

30 "Nigeria's plane crashes in last 20 years: timeline," *The Telegraph*, June 3 2012, accessed on May 21, 2017, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/nigeria/9309700/Nigerias->

and Chinedu together, as two expatriates in a time of national tumult. Indeed, the novella is set at Princeton University, where Ukamaka and Chinedu live in the same student building, but did not speak until tragedy connected them as Nigerians. As their friendship develops, Chinedu appears to serve as a means for Ukamaka to vent her frustrations over the end of her relationship with Udenna and little is said about Chinedu if not that he is friendly to other residents but vague about his academic work:

And so it surprised her that as she and Chinedu walked to the parking lot, he would wave to somebody, say hi to another. He told her about the Japanese post-doc fellow who sometimes gave him a ride to the mall, the German doctoral student whose two-year-old daughter called him Chindle. [...] He had once said something about chemistry, and she assumed he was doing a doctorate in chemistry. It had to be why she never saw him on campus; the science labs were so far off and so alien.<sup>31</sup>

Ukamaka takes notice of "how few groceries he bought and how carefully he scoured the sale flyers that Udenna had always ignored" (*TAN*, 155), but it is not until she once more centers the conversation around her complicated love life that the reader is able to access Chinedu's own story:

"It's not that simple," she said, slightly annoyed, because she wanted Udenna to call, because the photo was still up on her bookcase, because Chinedu sounded as if he alone knew what was best for her. She waited until they were back at their apartment building and Chinedu had taken his bags up to his apartment and come back down before she said, "You know, it really isn't as simple as you think it is. You don't know what it is to love an asshole." "I do." [...] "Back home. I was with him for almost two years." The moment was quiet. She picked up a napkin and realized that she had known intuitively, perhaps from the very beginning, but she said, because she thought he expected her to show surprise. "Oh, you're gay." (*TAN*, 157-158)

It is as a consequence of this moment of clarity that Chinedu describes his own story of complicated, unhappy love with Abidemi, a wealthy Lagos banker who kept Chinedu as a side affair even after he got married. During the exchange, it becomes more and more evident that Ukamaka and Chinedu's stories of heartbreak and loss mirror one another, showing the same intensity of feeling and regret. As a matter of fact, in Ukamaka's eyes, Udenna was a controlling man who desired life with her on his terms alone, but so too Abidemi unapologetically wished to keep Chinedu in an emotional Purgatory for his own benefit. Ukamaka herself renders the parallel between the two explicit:

"I watched him that day, the way he was with both of us there, drinking stout and making jokes about me to her [Abidemi's wife] and about her to me, and I knew he would go to bed and sleep well at night. If we continued, he would come to me and then go home to her and sleep well every night. I wanted him not to sleep well

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plane-crashes-in-last-20-years-timeline.html>

31 Adichie. *The Thing Around Your Neck* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), 154. Henceforth all quotes from the text will be referred to as *TAN* in parenthesis, in the text, and followed by page numbers.

sometimes." [...] "How can a person claim to love you and yet want you to do things that suit only them? Udenna was like that." Chinedu squeezed the pillow on his lap. "Ukamaka, not everything is about Udenna." "I'm just saying that Abidemi sounds a little bit like Udenna. I guess I just don't understand that kind of love." (*TAN*, 161)

Precisely by making Ukamaka and her unhappy love the main focus of the story, Adichie achieves a sense of normalization of Chinedu's sexuality. In fact, it is through Ukamaka's heartbreak that the reader accesses and empathizes with Chinedu's and the comparison between the two allows for the emergence of the idea that, no matter the genders involved, the experience of love and heartbreak and the raw emotions they entail are identical.

Moreover, Adichie furthers the process of normalization by representing Chinedu as both religious and proudly Nigerian/African, so as to undermine the thesis which views homosexuality as a Western deviation. In her article for *The Snoop*, Adichie explicitly states:

There has also been some nationalist posturing among supporters of the law. Homosexuality is 'unafrikan,' they say, and we will not become like the west. The west is not exactly a homosexual haven; acts of discrimination against homosexuals are not uncommon in the US and Europe. But it is the idea of 'unafrikaness' that is truly insidious. Sochukwuma was born of Igbo parents and had Igbo grandparents and Igbo great-grandparents. He was born a person who would romantically love other men. Many Nigerians know somebody like him. The boy who behaved like a girl. The girl who behaved like a boy. The effeminate man. The unusual woman. These were people we knew, people like us, born and raised on African soil. How then are they 'unafrikan?'<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, the very first words Chinedu speaks in the novella are to declare himself a fellow Nigerian to Ukamaka:

The knock sounded again, louder. She looked through the peephole: a pudgy, dark-skinned man who looked vaguely familiar though she could not remember where she had seen him before. Perhaps it was at the library or on the shuttle to the Princeton campus. She opened the door. He half-smiled and spoke without meeting her eye. "I am Nigerian. I live on the third floor. I came so that we can pray about what is happening in our country." (*TAN*, 142)

Even when Ukamaka reflects upon what may have been Udenna's disparaging account of Chinedu's possibly rural origins, the accent is still placed on the impossibility of Chinedu being anything other than Nigerian:

Udenna would have pointed out Chinedu's forehead and said that one did not need to hear Chinedu's accent to know that he was the sort of person who had gone to a community secondary school in his village and learned English by reading a dictionary in candlelight, because one could tell right away from his lumpy and vein-scarred forehead. It was what Udenna said about the Nigerian student at Wharton whose

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32 Adichie. "Chimamanda Adichie: Why can't he just be like everyone else?"

friendship he consistently snubbed, whose e-mails he never replied to. (*TAN*, 150)

If anything, indeed, the story shows Udenna and Ukamaka as less tied to Nigerian customs and more enamored with American society than Chinedu. Even on a topic so simple as food, which nevertheless is a powerful marker of nostalgia for home in a novella about two lonely people abroad, Chinedu playfully remarks on his 'Africanness':

"I think I'll get your favorite, sushi, instead of a sandwich," she said, her tone teasing. She had once asked if he liked sushi and he had said, "God forbid. I am an African man. I only eat cooked food." She added, "You really should try sushi sometime. How can you live in Princeton and not eat sashimi?" (*TAN*, 157)

Chinedu is African, he is a man, and he loves other men. Chinedu also vehemently loves God, which once more serves to illustrate how religion and homosexuality may coexist even within an individual. In her 2014 article, Adichie would go on to state that the Bible and religion should solely be standards for how people choose to lead their own lives, without imposing personal interpretation of a holy book onto the greater population:

Many Nigerians support the law because they believe the Bible condemns homosexuality. The Bible can be a basis for how we choose to live our personal lives, but it cannot be a basis for the laws we pass, not only because the holy books of different religions do not have equal significance for all Nigerians but also because the holy books are read differently by different people. The Bible, for example, also condemns fornication and adultery and divorce, but they are not crimes.<sup>33</sup>

Similarly, Chinedu's homosexuality is never presented as being in conflict with his faith, it does not even factor into his representation as a Christian. Instead, the only aspect of Chinedu's faith which Ukamaka contests is its dramatic language and expressions, which are nonetheless a product of the Nigerian Pentecostal community:

He prayed in that particularly Nigerian Pentecostal way that made her uneasy: he covered things with the blood of Jesus, he bound up demons and cast them in the sea, he battled evil spirits. She wanted to interrupt and tell him how unnecessary it was, this bloodying and binding, this turning faith into a pugilistic exercise; to tell him that life was a struggle with ourselves more than with a spear-wielding Satan; that belief was a choice for our conscience always to be sharpened. (*TAN*, 142)

And also:

What a luxury to have a faith like his, Ukamaka thought, so uncritical, so forceful, so impatient. And yet there was something about it that was exceedingly fragile; it was as if Chinedu could conceive of faith only in extremes, as if an acknowledgment of a middle ground would mean the risk of losing everything. (*TAN*, 164)

Finally, Chinedu's homosexuality acts as a red herring of sorts, as it is revealed that it

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33 Adichie. "Chimamanda Adichie: Why can't he just be like everyone else?"

is not the main source of conflict for his story arc, but rather a mere facet to his characterization. The source of Chinedu's secrecy and exceptionally self-restricting lifestyle is his status as an illegal immigrant in America. The axis of his representation as a homosexual intersects with that of his fragile legal status and the latter ultimately emerges as the greater issue:

"I am out of status. My visa expired three years ago. This apartment belongs to a friend. He is in Peru for a semester and he said I should come and stay while I try to sort myself out." [...] "I'm going to get a deportation notice from Immigration anytime soon. Nobody at home knows my real situation. I haven't been able to send them much since I lost my construction job. My boss was a nice man and was paying me under the table but he said he did not want trouble now that they are talking about raiding workplaces." (*TAN*, 163)

Through the immediacy of this revelation, Chinedu's homosexuality feels non-consequential, almost an afterthought in light of his very material hardship as an illegal immigrant. The reader is called to make the connection between Chinedu's odd behavior and Ukamaka's difficulty in placing him on campus as a student. Chinedu's sexuality never factors into this process, it stands as a mere part of him as a person, which was arguably what Adichie wished to achieve.

An example of unexpressed female homosexual desire by a possibly bisexual woman may instead be found in "On Monday of Last Week". Kamara, the novella's main character, moves from Nigeria to the US to rejoin with her husband Tobechei, only to find he is no longer the man she remembered. Displaced in a faraway country and caught in an increasingly unhappy marriage, Kamara experiences the cultural shock of American customs and lifestyle, especially that of the upper-middle class family where she has found employment as a babysitter:

She had come to understand that American parenting was a juggling of anxieties, and that it came with having too much food: a sated belly gave Americans time to worry that their child might have a rare disease that they had just read about, made them think they had the right to protect their child from disappointment and want and failure. A sated belly gave Americans the luxury of praising themselves for being good parents, as if caring for one's own child were the exception rather than the rule. (*TAN*, 81)

Neil, the child's father, is indeed the epitome of the exceedingly anxious and apprehensive parent from a well-off family, insisting that his son only eat organic meat and vegetables and "do very little high-fructose corn syrup, bleached flour, or trans fat" (*TAN*, 77). While Neil may be what American society deems a 'helicopter parent', his wife, Tracy, is consistently much more elusive in the story. Locked away in the basement throughout the whole day, Tracy pursues her art career in a separate place

from her family and without the interruption of human contact:

"Josh [Neil and Tracy's son] isn't allowed in the basement for now, so you can't go down there, either. [...] Tracy doesn't come up until the evenings. Scooters delivers soup and a sandwich to her every day and she's pretty self-sufficient down there." Neil paused. "You have to make sure you don't bother her for anything whatsoever." (*TAN*, 78)

Not unlike expectations aroused by forbidden rooms in Gothic literature, Kamara's interest for the reclusive Tracy is piqued precisely by her absence from the story. It is only on a 'Monday of last week' that Tracy emerges from the basement and Kamara's interest morphs into desire:

She turned, thinking it was Josh, but Tracy appeared, curvy in leggings and a tight sweater, smiling, squinting, pushing away long dreadlocks from her face with paint-stained fingers. It was a strange moment. Their eyes held and suddenly Kamara wanted to lose weight and wear makeup again. (*TAN*, 79)

Interestingly, in the lines that immediately follow, Adichie explores the apparently overwhelmingly widespread reaction to same-sex desire through an imagined comment by Chinwe, Kamara's closest friend: "A fellow woman who has the same thing that you have? her friend Chinwe would say if she ever told her. *Tufia!* What kind of foolishness is that?" (*TAN*, 80). Eromosele states that the passage serves to highlight how Kamara's initial reaction to the discovery of her attraction is "once again typical of the general reaction of Africans to homosexuality/lesbianism"<sup>34</sup> and that it serves, by contrast, to show how Kamara's sexuality appears to have changed on arrival in the US. While this argument potentially supports the theory of homosexuality as a Western influence, my contention for the purpose of the same passage, however, is that it serves to support the opposite theory. Indeed, the reason homosexuality is believed to be a Western import may not be that its nonexistence in African societies, but rather that it is largely absent from public discourse because of censorious commentary such as the imaginary one by Chinwe. There is no evidence whatsoever in the text that Kamara did not have the potential for homosexual attraction before leaving Nigeria. What is shown, however, is her attempt to repress her feelings by imagining the negative reaction of a loved one.

Furthermore, Kamara's attraction to Tracy and the expectations created by desire offer her a safe space of joy and thrill in the midst of her depressing marital life and the gradual loss of her cultural markers of home:

Saying those words to herself changed nothing, because what had happened in the

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34 Eromosele, "Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," 108.

kitchen that afternoon was a flowering of extravagant hope, because what now propelled her life was the thought that Tracy would come upstairs again. (*TAN*, 80)

On Tracy's part, the reader is never certain of the reciprocity of the attraction, although certain details may appear suggestive. Kamara's desire is nurtured by Tracy's unabashed interest in her life and her appearance as a possible model:

Tracy's hand was still on her chin, slightly tilting her head up, and Kamara felt, first, like an adored little girl, and then like a bride. She was extremely aware of her body, of Tracy's eye's, of the space between them being so small, so very small. "Have you ever been an artist's model?" Tracy asked. (*TAN*, 87)

The narration nevertheless ends on a sour note for Kamara, when she discovers Tracy has the same artistic interest in Josh's French tutor, which could either signify that Kamara's attraction had never been reciprocated or that Tracy moved on to another interest. The potential of Kamara's same-sex desire remains thus unexpressed:

"Have you ever been an artist's model?" [...] "You should think about it," Tracy said. She raised the apple to her lips and took a slow bite, her gaze never wavering from Maren's face. Neil was watching them with an indulgent smile, and Kamara looked away. She sat down next to Josh and took a cookie from his plate. (*TAN*, 94)

The third and final instance of same-sex relationships and desire in *The Thing Around Your Neck* appears in "Jumping Monkey Hill". In this novella, sexist and imperialist considerations combine in the form of an exquisitely white preoccupation for 'African authenticity'. The setting sees Ujunwa, the Nigerian protagonist, reach six other writers from various African countries at the luxurious Jumping Monkey Hill resort near Cape Town, where Edward, a retired British university lecturer, and his wife host a writing workshop. The activity calls for participants to produce a short story each and analyze them together. However, it soon becomes evident that it is Edward who carries out most of the judging, according to his taste and his view of Africa. Hence, at the core of the novella is the debate around the right to self-represent, to articulate the diverse stories of African experience against the backdrop of the ongoing imperialism of the Western gaze on the continent. Edward, an elderly, patronizing white man, incarnates the remnants of British colonialism which still haunt Africa, he is the mouthpiece who enforces the "single story" of Africa and simultaneously illustrates how imperialism still has a strong footing in a post-colonial era. While his restricting notions of 'authenticity' invest all the participants, it is mostly the Zimbabwean, the Senegalese, and Ujunwa herself (all women) who are affected and they represent three axes of imperialist oppression. As the Zimbabwean presents a story imbued in local culture and traditions,

about a couple who is advised by a priest to rid themselves of a witch's curse in order to conceive, Edward's critique of it shows a brazen disinterest for local realities in favor of purportedly loftier topics:

Then Edward spoke. The writing was certainly ambitious, but the story itself begged the question "So what?" There was something terribly passé about it when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under the horrible Mugabe. Ujunwa stared at Edward. What did he mean by "passé"? How could a story so true be passé? (*TAN*, 106)

Despite having been a professor at Cape Town University and being allegedly enamored with the African continent, Edward's behavior clearly denotes his inability to conceive of Africa as anything other than a story of war, violence, and repressive governments, as seen in his preferring a tale about the horrors of Mugabe to facets of local culture.

The Senegalese is the final representation of a homosexual character in the text and she presents an autobiographical story on her mourning for the death of her girlfriend. Aside from the emotion the young woman shows during the reading of her story, the autobiographical nature of it had already been explicitly established:

The Senegalese said her story was really *her* story, about how she mourned her girlfriend and how her grieving had emboldened her to come out to her parents although they now treated her being a lesbian as a mild joke and continued to speak of the families of suitable young men. (*TAN*, 102)

Edward simply erases the reality of the Senegalese's experience by stating that stories about homosexuality are not authentically African, thus imposing his own heterosexist notions of homosexuality as a lifestyle rather than a nature and explicitly supporting the theory of homosexuality as a Western import on the once pure African soil:

Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really. "Which Africa?" Ujunwa blurted out. [...] Then he looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. (*TAN*, 107)

Edward patronizes the Senegalese in a similar fashion to how he patronized Ujunwa when the former lashes out against his reductionist speech:

"This may be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" Edward asked. The Senegalese burst out in incomprehensible French and then, a minute of fluid speech later, said, "I am Senegalese! I am Senegalese!" Edward responded in equally swift French and then said in English, with a soft smile, "I think she had too much of that excellent Bordeaux," and some of the participants chuckled. (*TAN*, 107)

The only weapon Edward had to retaliate against the Senegalese's logical objection that her story could not be inauthentic simply because it was her story and she was Senegalese was to diminish her on a personal level and disregard her impassioned rebuke as alcohol-driven drivel. The only more sexist way he could have retaliated would have been to openly dismiss her as an irrational and emotional woman.

Ujunwa is equally silenced by Edward when she presents her story: an autobiographical novella about a young woman who faces dehumanizing sexism in the workplace her father found for her. Chioma, the protagonist, finds that the Merchant Trust bank where she is hired to do marketing uses her instead as attractive bait for potential clients, under the casual belief that she will essentially sell her body for the sake of the job. Despite the autobiographical nature of the story, which Ujunwa soon makes explicit, Edward once again dismisses it as inauthentic, an example of "agenda writing, it isn't a real story of real people" (*TAN*, 114). He also remarks: "It's never quite like that in real life, is it? Women are never victims in that sort of crude way and certainly not in Nigeria. Nigeria has women in high positions. The most powerful cabinet minister today is a woman" (*TAN*, 113). Interestingly, Edward cannot fathom women being subjected to such blatant sexism, but his inability to see women (perhaps even only black and/or African women) as potential victims may very well stem from his own blatant sexism. Indeed, he is seen to prey on Ujunwa in openly lecherous ways, even in what should be the safety of a professional environment:

"At first, Ujunwa tried not to notice that Edward often stared at her body, that his eyes were never on her face but always lower. [...] The participants were all seated on the terrace, and after he handed out the papers, Ujunwa saw that all the seats under the umbrellas were occupied. "I don't mind sitting in the sun," she said, already getting up. "Would you like me to stand up for you, Edward?" "I'd rather like you to lie down for me," he said. The moment was humid, thick; a bird cawed from far away. Edward was grinning. (*TAN*, 105)

Additionally, another female participant, the white South African, points out the racist component in Edward's leering, the fetishizing of Ujunwa as 'exotic' and thus with lower respectability than a white woman: "The white South African said Edward would never look at a white woman like that because what he felt for Ujunwa was a fancy without respect" (*TAN*, 108-109). Ujunwa comes to represent an axis of imperialist oppression based on the combined force of racism and sexism and, on his part, Edward does not attempt to hide his racist sexism because he is secure in his position of authority. In fact, Ujunwa herself seems at a loss for means to protest:

She should not have laughed when Edward said "I'd rather like you to lie down for me." It had not been funny. It had not been funny at all. She had hated it, hated the grin on his face and the glimpse of greenish teeth and the way he always looked at her chest rather than her face, the way his eyes climbed all over her, and yet she had made herself laugh like a deranged hyena. (*TAN*, 108)

The final novella in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, "The Headstrong Historian", also engages with the combined sexism and racism of the colonial project in Nigeria, where British customs, values, and gender roles were superimposed on the local population. The story takes place in a small Igbo village at the end of the Nineteenth century and spans the life of Nwamgba, an outspoken, assertive woman who suspects her late husband's cousins to be behind his untimely death. "The Headstrong Historian" examines Nwamgba's deeply independent nature within the context of traditional Igbo gender relations and expectations:

She went into her father's *obi* and told him she would run away from any other man's house if she was not allowed to marry Obierika. Her father found her exhausting, this sharp-tongued, headstrong daughter who had once wrestled her brother to the ground. (After which her father had warned everybody not to let the news leave the compound that the girl had thrown a boy.) (*TAN*, 198)

Additionally, Adichie illustrates the social stigma created by Nwamgba's apparent infertility once she does marry Obierika:

It was they [Obierika's cousins] who urged him, after her third miscarriage, to marry another wife. Obierika told them he would give it some thought but when he and Nwamgba were alone in her hut at night, he told her that he was sure they would have a home full of children, and that he would not marry another wife until they were old, so that they would have somebody to care for them. She thought this strange of him, a prosperous man with only one wife, and she worried more that he did about their childlessness, about the songs that people sang, melodious mean-spirited words: *She has sold her womb. She has eaten his penis. He plays his flute and hands over his wealth to her.* (*TAN*, 199)

When Obierika's cousins essentially empty out his property after his death, Nwamgba confronts them and the Women's Council is called into question, thus showing female participation in the political organization of Igbo villages prior to the changes wrought by colonialism:

It was when they emptied his barn of yams and led away the adult goats in his pen that she confronted them, shouting, and when they brushed her aside, she waited until evening and then walked around the clan singing about their wickedness, the abominations they were heaping on the land by cheating a widow, until the elders asked them to leave her alone. She complained to the Women's Council, and twenty women went at night to Okafo and Okoye's home, brandishing pestles, warning them to leave Nwamgba alone. (*TAN*, 202-203)

Despite the Council and the elders' intervention on her behalf, Nwamgba alone is not

able to stop Obierika's cousins from taking a piece of her land from her. It is around this time that white men raze the nearby village of Onicha to implant their church and school and also visit Nwamgba's clan. Soon after, the white men create a courthouse in Onicha to settle disputes, a fact which Nwamgba is shown to be ambivalent about, while her friend Ayaju voices the idea that it is the most violent and powerful who establish their rule:

The white men had set up a courthouse in Onicha where they judged disputes. They had indeed come to stay. For the first time, Nwamgba doubted her friend. Surely the people of Onicha had their own courts. [...] Ayaju laughed and told Nwamgba again that people ruled others when they had better guns. (*TAN*, 205)

Once Nwamgba learns that this courthouse tends to settle disputes in favor of the contender who has greater mastery of the English language, although deeply reluctant to do so, she decides to send her only son, Anikwenwa, to study in a missionary school so that he may one day win back her land in such a dispute. However, Nwamgba begins to take notice of how the new schools go beyond the sole teaching of the language and impose changes in social customs and gender relations:

Nwamgba was impressed by the teacher's spectacles, and she thought that the man in the story must have had fairly powerful medicine to be able to transform water into wine. But when the girls were separated and a woman teacher came to teach them how to sew, Nwamgba found this silly; in her clan girls learned to make pottery and a man sewed cloth. (*TAN*, 207-208)

The changes come to affect Anikwenwa, as well, and he begins to reject Igbo culture as a whole, with special emphasis on the traditional gender relations and expression. His view of the female body, even his mother's, is now laden with the idea of shame and sin:

He stopped eating her food, because, he said, it was sacrificed to idols. He told her to tie her wrapper around her chest instead of her waist, because her nakedness was sinful. She looked at him, amused by his earnestness, but worried nonetheless, and asked why he had only just begun to notice her nakedness. (*TAN*, 209-210)

Furthermore, Anikwenwa, after adopting the Christian name of Micheal, goes against traditional customs even in occasion of his own marriage. His objection to the confession ceremony of the bride shows his learned assumptions about female sexuality: while Igbo culture did not possess a myth about the sexual purity of women, Christianity teaches Anikwenwa the virginity myth and the importance of control over female sexuality. His thoughts on the confession ceremony are expressed in the following passage:

He shook his head furiously and told her that the confession made by a woman before

marriage, in which she, surrounded by female relatives, swore that no man had touched her since her husband had declared his interest, was sinful, because Christian wives should not have been touched *at all*. (TAN, 212)

Anikwenwa's shifting attitude towards Igbo culture and towards womanhood and the female body are indicative of his transformation into a subjugated colonial subject. In the specific case of Igbo culture, the imperialist superimposing of British customs in relation to gender and sexuality illustrate a growing restriction of femininity and female agency, especially in terms of sexual freedom. "The Headstrong Historian" therefore showcases how traditional customs may prove restrictive for women (e.g. the social stigma of Nwamgba's supposed infertility and her impossibility to act out against her husband's cousins), while the cultural and literal violence brought on by colonialism denatured local customs and traditions, proving to be even more restrictive towards women.

The one positive note of hope in the story is brought on by Grace/Afamefuna, granddaughter to Nwamgba, who rejects her father's authoritarian rule and questions her education, moving on to become a historian and legally changing her name to Afamefuna, the name Nwamgba had chosen for her. Afamefuna, through her own combative spirit and her grandmother's influence, learns to dispute the unquestioned Western notion of Africa as an ahistorical reality. Her writing of Southern Nigerian history is a direct reaction to the repression of colonialism, the reappropriation of an erased culture using the channels created by the colonizer:

It was Grace who, driving past Agueke on her way back, would become haunted by the image of a destroyed village and would go to London and to Paris and to Onicha, sifting through moldy files in archives, reimagining the lives and smells of her grandmother's world, for the book she would write called *Pacifying with Bullets: A Reclaimed History of Southern Nigeria*. (TAN, 217)

"The Headstrong Historian" thus reimagines the life of an Igbo woman at the turn of a century that would destroy the very fabric of Igbo society and presents the limitations to women both in traditional life and under colonial rule. Despite the representation of the evils of imperialism, the novella nonetheless closes on an optimistic note, showing the revolutionary power of "headstrong" women.

#### **4.4 *Americanah***

*Americanah* is, to date, Adichie's latest novel, published in 2013 by Alfred A. Knopf and winner of the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award. The story is split between

Nigeria, the US, and the UK and follows the perspectives of Ifemelu and Obinze, teenage sweethearts who not only grow into their relationship, but also experience the complications of distance, displacement, and separation. In *Americanah*, Adichie is able to combine themes concerning love, depression, nostalgia, racism, and gender expectations of femininity and masculinity within a deeply technological era. The setting is indeed the present day and the narrative decision to have Ifemelu maintain a successful blog is not only reflective of the accessible activism provided by the Internet, it also creates a distinct narrative frame in which social and political issues regarding mostly America (and, in a later blog, also Nigeria) are directly addressed. Not unlike the excerpts from Ugwu's book on the Nigeria-Biafra war, which are interspersed throughout *Half of a Yellow Sun*, posts from Ifemelu's blog are consistent corollaries to the narration, offering tidbits of information and social commentary on race and its intersections in the US.

From the perspective of femininity, Ifemelu's narration offers insight into a variety of issues that potentially affect young women, especially women of color in racialized white societies. Within the novel, hair – particularly black hair – is a powerfully pervasive symbol of combined racial and sexual prejudice in American society. In a Channel 4 News interview in 2013, while presenting *Americanah*, Adichie stated:

It's a political thing. [...] Black women's hair is political. [...] By walking in somewhere with my hair like this, people make assumptions, immediate assumptions. If my hair isn't straight, people can assume that you're either- you know, they might think that you're an angry black woman, or they might think you're very soulful, or they might think you're an artist, or they might think you're vegetarian. [...] I'm just interested in hair as a means of talking about other things: what the society tells us is beautiful. Because you look at women's magazines and these things matter. And we look at what's on television and what, sort of, the larger society says is beautiful. It's straight hair. And so, you have young girls who are growing up with that in their heads and it's something that I want to talk about.<sup>35</sup>

Accordingly, Ifemelu begins to learn the complications of black hair in America through phases of self-discovery, i.e. from her initial arrival with box braids, to her trying to conform to white American society with chemically straightened hair, to her acceptance of her blackness and the re-discovery of natural hair, to, finally, her return to Nigeria with braided hair. Each of these phases represents a specific mindset of Ifemelu's and each is a different attempt to conform to one aspect or other of American society (especially white and African American), until her ultimate decision and longstanding

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35 "Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on love, race and hair," YouTube video, 10:36, posted by Channel 4 News, April 10, 2013, 8:12, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-n8LtRi2i8c>>

nostalgia lead her back to Nigeria after years.

On a further note, the African hair salon is a constant setting throughout the book, which opens in *medias res* with Ifemelu having left her second American boyfriend, closing her blog, and planning to return to Nigeria. Scenes and snippets of the bustling, culturally diverse salon are interspersed throughout the first half of the novel, offering a present-time counterpoint to the narration of Ifemelu's past. The 'anthropological' value of the hair salon, mentioned in a previous chapter, lies precisely in its consisting of an African hub in the state of Pennsylvania, with mostly Francophone women of diverse backgrounds, but who nonetheless share the experience of being far from home:

It was her first time at this salon – her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Côte d'Ivoire to get married – but it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, [...] and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by others. [...] The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. (*A*, 9-10)

Curiously, this particular salon has also Nollywood films running in the background of most of the scenes set in it, a possible reference to the multiplicity of cultural crossings happening inside its walls. The salon is also a place where women take on different selves in order to conform to American society, as in the case of the faux-niceties of American customer service:

"No problem. I will do it again," Mariama said. She was agreeable, and smooth-tongued, but Ifemelu could tell that she thought her customer was a troublemaker, and there was nothing wrong with the cornrow, but this was a part of her new American self, this fervour of customer service, this shiny falseness of surfaces, and she had accepted it, embraced it. When the customer left, she might shrug out of that self and say something to Halima and Aisha about Americans, how spoiled and childish and entitled they were, but when the next customer came, she would become, again, a faultless version of her American self. (*A*, 231)

Likewise, the phases of Ifemelu's hair the parallel different manifestations of her own American self. The first of these which will be analysed is chemically straightened hair in relation to whiteness and the assumptions white Americans attach to manifestly non-white hair, especially in professional environments. Once Ifemelu obtains a job interview for a public relations position in Baltimore, the first thing she is advised to do by her university career counsellor is to straighten her hair and Ifemelu herself explains to the wealthy and white Curt, her first American boyfriend, the necessity of not

showing kinky hair in a high-profile workplace:

"My full and cool hair would work if I were interviewing to be a backup singer in a jazz band, but I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it's going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky." (A, 252)

The process to chemically straighten one's hair, however, is an excruciatingly painful and expensive one, going as far as burning and damaging the scalp in order to achieve the whitest possible texture for hair. From the text:

At night, she struggled to find a comfortable position on her pillow. Two days later, there were scabs on her scalp. Three days later, they oozed pus. Curt wanted her to see a doctor and she laughed at him. It would heal, she told him, and it did. Later, after she breezed through the job interview, and the woman shook her hand and said she would be a "wonderful fit" in the company, she wondered if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro. (A, 252)

Indeed, chemical straightening is endorsed and implicitly enforced to eradicate physical signifiers of blackness (other than skin color, of course) from workplace environments. The idea of 'professional' coinciding with straight hair is reminiscent of the concept of respectability politics applied to the African American community, i.e. the more one takes on the markers of whiteness and white American customs and speech, the more respect one will achieve. Respectability politics may be said to be a faulty notion because of their similarity to the inferiority complex theorized by Fanon and Bhabha's definition of mimicry (albeit completely emptied of any subversive value). As seen with both Fanon and Bhabha, mimicking the white colonizer never truly achieved equality with the colonizer, but rather brought the mimic man into a state of alterity from himself and his culture. In an identical fashion, Ifemelu's straightening of her hair brings her outside of her self:

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. She left the salon almost mournfully; while the hairdresser had flatironed the ends, the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (A, 251)

Moreover, the way in which race and sex entwine on the topic of straightened hair is simply that it is presented as a practice only women must endure to achieve a 'professional' appearance. Surely, the racist component to respectable hair would come into play for black men as well and it is not difficult to imagine traditionally black hairstyles such as afros or cornrows being frowned upon. However, the pain of chemical straightening is a process that appears to be reserved to black women, especially

considering Western beauty standards place eminent value on long hair for women.

The second phase Ifemelu's hair goes through is at opposite ends with the concept of respectability politics. As a matter of fact, after consistently straightening her hair had caused damage to her scalp and even limited her everyday decisions, Ifemelu is left with little else to do except to cut it and keep it natural:

"Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You're caged in. Your hair rules you. You didn't go running with Curt today because you don't want to sweat out this straightness. That picture you sent me, you had your hair covered on the boat. You're always battling to make your hair do what it wasn't meant to do. If you go natural and take good care of your hair, it won't fall off like it's doing now." (A, 257)

Despite initial hatred of her natural hair, Ifemelu grows to appreciate and even love it, especially thanks to an online resource meant to bring together a community of black women who had begun to reject the idea of having to hide their kinky hair:

HappilyKinkyNappy.com had a bright yellow background, message boards full of posts, thumbnail photos of black women blinking at the top. They had long trailing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. They called relaxers "creamy crack". They were done with pretending that their hair was what it was not, done with running from the rain and flinching from sweat. They complimented each other's photos and ended comments with "hugs". They complained about black magazines never having natural-haired women in their pages, about drugstore products so poisoned by mineral oil that they could not moisturize natural hair. They traded recipes. They sculpted for themselves a world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude. (A, 261-262)

Allowing her hair to be natural brings Ifemelu further on a journey of self-discovery and gradually she begins to love her authentic self even through the symbolic marker of hair, no longer needing to conform to white ideals of respectability. This process will also ultimately lead her further away from Curt and closer to Blaine, the politically active, environmentally aware African American professor.

Natural hair, however, is also shown to carry negative, sexist connotations from within the black community itself, as exemplified by a stranger's comment to Ifemelu while in the company of Curt:

One day, at the farmers' market, as she stood hand in hand with Curt in front of a tray of apples, a black man walked past and muttered, "You ever wonder why he likes you looking all jungle like that?" She stopped, unsure for a moment whether she had imagined those words, and then she looked back at the man. He walked with too much rhythm in his step, which suggested to her a certain fickleness of character. A man not worth paying any attention to. Yet his words bothered her, prised open the door for new doubts. (A, 263)

The man's words draw attention to the internalized racism implicit in equating natural

black hair to "jungle" and to the racism he projects on Curt's apparent satisfaction with Ifemelu's Afro, i.e. that he must want her to look "jungle" so as to better dominate her. His words also take a sexist connotation, however, because his comment is an overt example of the casual policing of the female body, which, in a patriarchal society, is on display for even strangers to verbally objectify or censor. Moreover, the stranger's idea that Ifemelu must be keeping her hair natural because that is how Curt likes it is in itself sexist, as it views Ifemelu's agency on her own body reduced by the approval or disapproval of a male partner.

As a further point, natural hair seems to be a divisive topic even within Nigerian beauty standards, as exemplified by Auntie Uju's words:

"Look at the way he behaves as if anything you touch starts smelling like perfume. He really likes you," Auntie Uju said, and then, face wrinkling, she added, "And even with your hair like that." [...] "It is like jute." Auntie Uju plunged a hand into Ifemelu's Afro. [...] "Okay, you can speak English about it but I am just saying what is true. There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair." (A, 268)

Indeed, Uju's comment is reflective of a larger attitude towards natural hair present in Nigeria, which specifically views natural hair as synonymous with disorder or shabbiness. It is this attitude that Adichie confronts in her tenth suggestion in *Dear Ijeawele*:

Try not to link hair with pain. [...] Part of the reason that hair is about pain for so many girls is that adults are determined to conform to a version of 'neat' that means Too Tight and Scalp-Destroying and Headache-Infusing. We need to stop. I've seen girls in school in Nigeria being terribly harrassed for their hair not being 'neat', merely because some of their God-given hair had curled up in glorious tight little balls at their temples. [...] Chizalum will notice very early on – because children are perceptive – what kind of beauty the mainstream world values. She will see it in magazines and films and television. She will see that whiteness is valued. She will notice that hair texture that is valued is straight or swingy, and hair that is valued falls down rather than stands up.<sup>36</sup>

The connection between natural hair and 'untidiness' is thus the result of mainstream media influence which creates standards of whiteness far beyond the confines of the Western world. When typically white physical markers hold the utmost value, black women and girls are not only criticized for how their hair naturally grows, they are also forced into painful rituals to conform.

Finally, Ifemelu's decision to braid her hair before going back to Nigeria, which is the very first scene in the novel, may be considered reflective of her nostalgia for home and the desire to conform to Nigerian beauty standards, where natural hair would be less

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36 Adichie. *Dear Ijeawele*, pos. 280-291.

accepted. Moreover, the braiding of Ifemelu's hair, which is diluted throughout the narration up to her decision to move back to Nigeria, is the counterpoint to her taking on various American selves. By wearing her hair in braids again, just as she did when she first arrived in the US, Ifemelu attempts to regain her Nigerian self.

A further issue that is presented through the character of Ifemelu is that of the consequences of displacement (and often subsequent poverty) for young women and the potential dangers they might face. Indeed, Ifemelu's position is particularly difficult, as her student visa would not allow her to legally work in the US for the duration of her stay and, simultaneously, she would not be able to sustain herself without working. The solution is soon found by Auntie Uju, consisting of using someone else's identity and searching for low-profile job openings:

She sat by the window – somebody had stuck a blob of chewed gum on the pane – and spent long minutes looking again at the Social Security card and driver's licence that belonged to Ngozi Okonkwo. Ngozi Okonkwo was at least ten years older than she was, with a narrow face, eyebrows that started as little balls before loping into arcs, and a jaw shaped like the letter *V*. [...] "All of us look alike to white people," Auntie Uju said. [...] "I'm not joking. Amara's cousin came last year and she doesn't have her papers yet, so she has been working with Amara's ID. You remember Amara? Her cousin is very fair and thin. They do not look alike at all. Nobody noticed. [...] Just make sure you always remember your new name. (*A*, 148)

The job hunt, however, proves substantially fruitless and, while her debts continue to accumulate, Ifemelu is forced out of sheer desperation to look into more ambiguous arrangements:

Newspapers were strewn on the floor, job listings circled in ink. She picked one up and flipped through, looking at advertisements she had already seen. ESCORTS caught her eye again. Ginika had said to her, "Forget that escort thing. They say it isn't prostitution but it is, and the worst thing is that you get maybe a quarter of what you earn because the agency takes the rest. I know this girl who did it in freshman year." Ifemelu read the advertisement and thought, again, of calling, but she didn't, because she was hoping that the last interview she went for, a waitress position in a little restaurant that didn't pay a salary, only tips, would come through. They had said they would call her by the end of the day if she got the job; she waited until very late but they did not call. (*A*, 186)

As her unemployment and increasing poverty drag Ifemelu further into an onset of major depression, it is one culminating, traumatic event that pushes her into a protracted episode of undiagnosed mental illness, which she refuses to recognize as such. Ifemelu had previously rejected a job opening as the personal assistant for "help relaxing" (*A*, 176) to a sports coach out of her own instinct of preservation and the obvious sexual overtones in the presentation of the job. It is precisely sheer desperation, born of her

inability to afford her room and her bills, that drives her back to the sports coach, deeply reluctant to take on the job, but at a material loss for other options. The "assistance" required by the coach is as squalid as it initially sounded to Ifemelu and, yet, despite having attempted to deny him sex, she finds herself consenting out of necessity to his deeply unwanted touching:

There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be here, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. Afterwards, she lay still, coiled and deadened. He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. She had lain on his bed, and when he placed her hand between his legs, she had curled and moved her fingers. Now, even after she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged to her. (A, 189-190)

In this scene and in the period following, Ifemelu shows symptoms similar to those of rape victims, i.e. depression, shame, self-loathing, and difficulty in relating her experience. However, while Ifemelu's mental state on her experience with the coach is worsened by the idea that she had consented and therefore caused her own unhappiness, her encounter with the coach may nevertheless be placed within the realm of molestation/non-consensual sex. Indeed, Ifemelu's consent was not free, but conditioned by her poverty and need, which, in turn, became a weapon in the hands of the coach, who felt secure in his position because he knew that her coming there meant she had no other choice:

There was, in his expression and tone, a complete assuredness; she felt defeated. How sordid it all was, that she was here with a stranger who already knew she would stay. He knew she would stay because she had come. She was already here, already tainted. (A, 189)

Depending on the definition of consent, this scene represents either a business transaction or an act of abuse towards a person in need, whose economic weakness was exploited in exchange for sex (not entirely unlike Father Marcel's abuse of the girls in *Half of a Yellow Sun*). My theory is that, given Ifemelu's profound emotional reaction to the event, which she did not experience as a transaction, but as a personal, intimate violation, this scene may be said to represent sexual abuse and exploitation. As a matter of fact, Ifemelu's immediate reaction is one of disgust and sense of uncleanness, she feels tainted: "Now, even after she had washed her hands, holding the crisp, slender hundred-dollar bill he had given her, her fingers still felt sticky; they no longer belonged

to her" (A, 190). Moreover, her disgust extends to herself as well, mainly because of her biological reaction of arousal to the act of stimulation. It is so that she feels she cannot place herself in the position of a victim: she was technically there of her own free will, her body climaxed, and she felt obliged to touch him when he moved her hand. This combination of helplessness and guilt hinder Ifemelu's attempts at trying to vocalize the trauma of her experience, either to Obinze, still her boyfriend at the time, or to Auntie Uju. Uju's detached approach, in particular, seals Ifemelu's idea of her being complicit and not a victim, of nothing relevant actually having taken place:

"Won't you ask me what I did, Auntie? Won't you ask me what I did before the man paid me a hundred dollars?" Ifemelu asked, a new anger sweeping over her, treading itself through her fingers so that they shook. "What did you do?" Auntie Uju asked flatly. Ifemelu hung up. (A, 190)

Ifemelu's already fragile mental state is shaken by the trauma of the experience and, combined with the lack of validation on the part of her aunt, it causes her to close herself off, to crystallize a sense of rage towards the coach, which never finds a suitable outlet or expression. As a matter of fact, after her attempt at relating her story to Uju, Ifemelu will keep silent about the ordeal. A passage from the text illustrates the unexpressed rage in her revenge fantasies and how she herself is conscious on some level of his having exploited her poverty:

She could not sleep, she could not distract herself. She began to think about killing the tennis coach. She would hit him on the head over and over with an axe. She would plunge a knife into his muscled chest. He lived alone, he probably had other women coming to his room to spread their legs for his stubby finger with its bitten-back nail. Nobody would know which of them had done it. She would leave the knife sunk in his chest and then search his drawers for his bundle of one-hundred-dollar bills, so that she could pay her rent and her tuition. (A, 190-191)

Her rage remains nonetheless unexpressed, morphing into a state of deflation and apathy, which is characteristic of major depressive episodes. Ifemelu loses interest and motivation in life itself and drives away her loved ones, especially Obinze, because of her inability to communicate the cause of her suffering and because of the rejection she experienced when she had attempted to do so. Her behavior and perception of reality are symptomatic of the clinically depressed, as seen in the following passage:

She woke up torpid each morning, slowed by sadness, frightened by the endless stretch of day that lay ahead. Everything had thickened. She was swallowed, lost in a viscous haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness. Between her and what she should feel, there was a gap. She cared about nothing. She wanted to care, but she no longer knew how; it had slipped from her memory, the ability to care. Sometimes she woke up flailing and helpless, and she saw, in front of her and behind her and all around her, an utter hopelessness. She knew there was no point in being here, in being alive, but she had no

energy to think concretely of how she could kill herself. (*A*, 191)

While Ifemelu's depression is due to multiple combined factors, its origin is easily identifiable in a series of events caused by the vulnerability of her legal state. There is an intersection of issues that may affect displaced women, in particular, poverty and the forced necessity to work in illegal ways may make women vulnerable to sexual predators who capitalize on their economic and legal fragility.

As a further point, the character of Ifemelu is also representative of the question of female assertion and self-expression, both verbally and sexually. The theory I intend to support in this regard is that Ifemelu is an example of an outspoken, assertive woman, who must nevertheless confront her own fragilities and the quest for authentic self-expression, especially in relation to her male partners. Moreover, the representation of Ifemelu's sexuality, tentative in her adolescence and free in her young adulthood, is expressive of a view of female desire as present and natural (as opposed to the widespread censorious approach to women's sexualities), fundamentally in contrast with the more common representation of sexual desire as pertaining solely to men, of sex as something unreciprocally given by women to men for their pleasure.

As far as the former argument is concerned, Ifemelu is represented at odds with *Purple Hibiscus*' Kambili, who could not speak. Indeed, Ifemelu's most distinguishable trait is her inability to censor herself, her fundamental need to speak her mind:

"Join that group, Ifemelu," Sister Ibinabo said. Ifemelu folded her arms, and as often happened when she was about to say something she knew was better unsaid, the words rushed up her throat. "Why should I make decorations for a thief?" [...] "What did you say?" Sister Ibinabo asked quietly, offering a chance for Ifemelu to apologize, to put the words back in her mouth. But Ifemelu felt herself unable to stop, her heart thumping, hurtling on a fast-moving path. (*A*, 61)

And also, still from her adolescence: "Aren't you hot in that jacket?" Ifemelu asked. The question came out before she could restrain herself, so used was she to sharpening her words, to watching for terror in the eyes of boys" (*A*, 68). Furthermore, Ifemelu appears to enjoy the image of confidence she projects: "She had always liked this image of herself as too much trouble, as different, and she sometimes thought of it as a carapace that kept her safe" (*A*, 72). Her older self does not reject her outspoken nature, although, coming from an African country into America, she encounters the stereotypes associated with outspoken black women, as exemplified by her blog posts:

In describing black women you admire, always use the word "STRONG" because that is what black women are supposed to be in America. If you are a woman, please do not

... speak your mind as you are used to doing in your country. Because in America, strong-minded black women are SCARY. And if you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun. (A, 273-274)

Obviously, Ifemelu's characterization does not stop at her need to speak her mind, but rather takes into account the complexities and fragilities that may co-exist in an individual, as already mentioned with her episode of depression. Ifemelu is outspoken, albeit extremely fragile, surely in part because of her estrangement from her home country and the lack of familiar cultural signifiers in America.

If Ifemelu's journey in America may be compared to a quest for her authentic self (also and especially in relation to the multiplicity of selves that America either imposes or demands the individual take on), ending with her return to Nigeria as a more mature character, a similar argument may be made for her relationships with men. Indeed, positing Obinze as the partner she feels most authentic with, Curt and Blaine represent different perceptions of herself and also different forms of control over her true self. Curt, cousin to Kimberly, whom Ifemelu babysits for, not only comes from a very different economic and cultural background from Ifemelu (he is a very wealthy, white American), he places her in a difficult personal situation of economic dependency from him. Ifemelu's thoughts after his finding a job interview for her are especially poignant: "She felt, in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange the world, have things slide into the spaces that he wanted them to" (A, 249). Moreover, Curt is shown to be dependent on her validation, which does not leave her much room for assertion, but rather traps Ifemelu into catering to his alleged insecurities:

"Isn't this great?" he would ask her, and she would say yes, it was great. He was always thinking of what else to *do* and she told him that it was rare for her, because she had grown up not doing, but being. She added quickly, though, that she liked it all, because she did like it and she knew, too, how much he needed to hear that. In bed, he was anxious. "Do you like that? Do you enjoy me?" he asked often. And she said yes, which was true, but she sensed that he did not always believe her, or that his belief only lasted so long before he would need to hear her affirmation again. There was something in him, lighter than ego but darker than insecurity, that needed constant buffing, polishing, waxing. (A, 256)

Ultimately, Ifemelu's disaffection from Curt derives from her having to perform a feeling, a version of herself which was not authentic:

"There was a feeling I wanted to feel that I did not feel." [...] She had not entirely believed herself while with him – happy, handsome Curt, with his ability to twist life into the shapes he wanted. She loved him, and the spirited easy life he gave her, and yet often she fought the urge to create rough edges, to squash his sunniness, even if just a

little. (A, 355)

Furthermore, a problematic aspect to Curt may be that he appears to collect 'exotic' girlfriends in a possibly fetishizing way, as framed in the passage where his mother is introduced:

She adored her son – the child born late in life when she wasn't sure she could still have children, the charmer, the one whose manipulations she always gave in to. He was her adventurer who would bring back exotic species – he had dated a Japanese girl, a Venezuelan girl – but would, with time, settle down properly. She would tolerate anybody he liked, but she felt no obligation for affection. (A, 244)

Blaine, on the other hand, is impossibly different from Curt, but no less limiting to Ifemelu's authentic self. Blaine is a highly politicized, deeply intellectual character, who, as an African American, is very much aware of the racialized structure of American society. Blaine and Ifemelu's relationship is also parallel to her acceptance of her blackness in America. Nevertheless, her being an African sets her apart from the experience of African Americans and, so too, there always remains a level of distance and complication between herself and Blaine. What will be presently examined, however, is Blaine's controlling nature, whereby his love for Ifemelu appears to be secondary to the standards he sets for her as a fellow politicized intellectual. Indeed, one of the first mentions of Blaine in the *Americanah* involves his superior attitude towards literature:

A precious performance, Blaine had called it, in that gently forbearing tone he used when they talked about novels, as though he was sure that she, with a little more time and a little more wisdom, would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men and packed with *things*, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness. (A, 13-14)

Blaine, too, is often presented as 'skimming' over emotions and 'stylishly aware of his stylishness' insofar as the whole of his persona is projected into social and ideological battle. He almost stereotypically reflects the image of the idealistic intellectual who is also very environmentally aware. Tellingly, Blaine sets the same standards for Ifemelu and appears to have no patience for the humanity of error, as shown when Ifemelu lies to him about her reason for not attending a protest organized by him:

He came back the next day and looked at her, a glare like silver in his eyes, and said, "You lied." It was said with a kind of horror that baffled her, as though he had never considered it possible that she could lie. She wanted to say, "Blaine, people lie." But she said, "I'm sorry." "Why?" He was looking at her as though she had reached in and torn away his innocence, and for a moment she hated him, this man who ate apple

cores and turned even that into something of a moral act. (A, 426)

Blaine's moral integrity borders on arrogance when he dismisses as lazy Ifemelu's interpretation of her own experience as a native of a Third World country in relation to the very American need for absolute honesties:

"It's different for me and I think it's because I'm from the Third World," she said. "To be a child of the Third World is to be aware of the many different constituencies you have and how honesty and truth must always depend on context." She had felt clever to have thought of this explanation but Blaine shook his head even before she finished speaking and said, "That is so lazy, to use the Third World like that." (A, 396)

The expression of Ifemelu's authentic self and even her assertiveness are thus hindered by Blaine's controlling idealism.

Conversely, Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze, even at its youngest and most immature stages, shows the markers of what will render it durable when they are both adults. With Obinze, as a matter of fact, Ifemelu does not have to curb the complexities of her nature, her assertiveness and her fragilities, her human fallibility. It is only with Obinze that Ifemelu feels a full sense of herself: "She rested her head against his and felt, for the first time, what she would often feel with him: a self-affection. He made her like herself. With him, she was at ease; her skin felt as though it was the right size" (A, 72-73).

On a further note, the issue of female desire as presented in *Americanah* may be seen differently as conveyed through Ifemelu and through Auntie Uju and Kosi, Obinze's wife. Indeed, following Ifemelu from adolescence to adulthood, her approach to sex evolves from the anxiety laden in her first encounter with Obinze to a more mature, active desire. Obinze's mother plays an important role in the treatment of sexuality in the novel, as she presents Ifemelu with the idea of sexual activity as participatory, but with potentially unequal consequences for the woman. As a matter of fact, even before Ifemelu eventually becomes sexually active with Obinze in university – in a disappointing first encounter, given the anxieties and expectations she had attached to the act – Obinze's mother had already mentioned the idea of 'owning' oneself and one's body before being able to consent to sex:

"If anything happens between you and Obinze, you are both responsible. But Nature is unfair to women. An act is done by two people but if there are any consequences, one person carries it alone. [...] I want to advise you. I am aware that, in the end, you will do what you want. My advice is that you wait. You can love without making love. It is a beautiful way of showing your feelings but it brings responsibility, great responsibility, and there is no rush. I will advise you to wait until you are at least in the

university, wait until you own yourself a little more. Do you understand?" "Yes," Ifemelu said. She did not know what "own yourself a little more" meant. (A, 86-87)

Rather than being a simple policing of young female sexuality or a promotion of chastity, Obinze's mother's speech sheds light on the importance of informed consent in matters of sexuality. Ifemelu, at this stage, is possibly too young to understand the concept of owning herself, which possibly entails being confident in herself and in the importance of her needs and desires. It is precisely because Obinze's mother knows she is yet too young to understand that she advises her to wait until she can fully consent to sex, so as to have the experience be something she actively participates in and not something she may feel subjected to. In point of fact, her first sexual encounter with Obinze, despite taking place in university, nonetheless shows the signs of her not being emotionally ready for the experience:

They were both laughing, and then the laughter stilled, gave way to a new, strange graveness, a slippery joining. It felt, to Ifemelu, like a weak copy, a floundering imitation of what she had imagined it would be. After he pulled away, jerking and gasping and holding himself, a discomfort nagged at her. She had been tense through it all, unable to relax. [...] The unplannedness of it all had left her a little shaken, and also a little disappointed. It seemed somehow as though it had not been worth it after all. (A, 113-114)

Conversely, as an adult, Ifemelu's approach to sexuality is characterized by more freedom and her being the subject of her own desire. Female desire, as presented through Ifemelu, is a core aspect of the novel. Indeed, Ifemelu is not shackled by the shame of hiding her desire and the text itself does not shy away from the often ignored topic of female masturbation: "I touch myself thinking of you," she said" (A, 551). At times, the innocence of her curiosity is shadowed by the fear of betrayal in her partners: "She sighed. 'Ceiling, it's nothing. I'm just curious about him. Nothing is ever going to happen. But I am curious. You get curious about other girls, don't you?' He was looking at her, his eyes fearful. 'No,' he said coldly. 'I don't'" (A, 112). At other times, within her apathy in her relationship with Curt, her sexual curiosity evolves into betrayal:

She had done it, in truth, because she was curious, but she would not tell Ginika this, because it would seem flippant; Ginika would not understand, Ginika would prefer a grave and important reason like self-sabotage. She was not even sure she liked him, Rob, who wore dirty ripped jeans, grimy boots, rumpled flannel shirts. She did not understand grunge, the idea of looking shabby because you could afford not to be shabby; it mocked true shabbiness. The way he dressed made him seem superficial to her, and yet she was curious about him, about how he would be, naked in bed with her. (A, 355)

It is precisely when confronted by Curt about this betrayal that she confronts the idea of

sex as something of herself a woman gives instead of as an equally participatory activity:

"You gave him what he wanted," Curt said. The planes of his face were hardening. It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss of herself, would say. In a sudden giddy fit of recklessness, she corrected Curt. "I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental." (*A*, 356)

The idea of sex as something a woman gives of herself had already been presented in a much earlier passage involving Aunty Uju: "When Ifemelu met Obinze, she told Aunty Uju that she had met the love of her life, and Aunty Uju told her to let him kiss and touch but to not let him put it inside" (*A*, 65). The language used by Uju to advise Ifemelu is radically different from the one used by Obinze's mother. For Uju, sex is an act a woman 'lets' a man do to her, not a fully reciprocal activity. The only desire visualized in this conception of sex is male desire, female sexual desire is either wholly absent or an afterthought. In eliminating female subjectivity from sex, sexual intercourse achieves the status of a ritualized, mechanical activity that a woman provides to a man, as shown in the character of Kosi, who is driven by the need to conform to all exterior expectations and markers of prosperity. Her marriage to Obinze is largely presented as a complex act of representation where Kosi plays the role of wife to the best of what society expects of her and this act of performing involves the sexual sphere as well:

That night, Kosi sidled close to him, in offering. It was not a statement of desire, her caressing his chest and reaching down to take his penis in her hand, but a votive offering. [...] Ifemelu demanded of him. "No, don't come yet, I'll kill you if you come," she would say, or "No, baby, don't move," then she would dig into his chest and move at her own rhythm, and when finally she arched her back and let out a sharp cry, he felt accomplished to have satisfied her. She expected to be satisfied, but Kosi did not. Kosi always met his touch with complaisance, and sometimes he would imagine her pastor telling her that a wife should have sex with her husband, even if she didn't feel like it, otherwise the husband would find solace in a Jezebel. (*A*, 568-569)

The direct comparison between Ifemelu and Kosi serves to show the two opposite approaches to the visualization of active female desire: while Ifemelu is fully present in the sexual act and demands as much as she gives, Kosi merely acquiesces or offers, female desire is not visualized or considered in her case.

If characters such as Aunty Uju, Kosi, and especially Ifemelu serve to illustrate gendered expectations of femininity and the intersections between gender expectations and race (in America), characters such as Dike, nephew to Ifemelu, and Obinze himself

serve the same purpose for gendered expectations of masculinity. In particular, Dike, having been born in Nigeria and raised in the US, suffers from the intersection of his gender and his race in America, showing the intricacies of social assumptions about black men and their devastating psychological repercussions. The stereotype that Adichie illustrates as being uniquely attached to representations of black masculinity in America is that of aggression and, even from an extremely young age, Dike suffers from that racist gendered expectation being imposed on him by his teachers:

"Dike's teacher said he is aggressive," [Uju] told Ifemelu one day, after she had been called to come in and see the principal. "Aggressive, of all things. She wants him to go to what they call special ed, where they will put him in a class alone and bring somebody who is trained to deal with mental children to teach him. I told the woman that it is not my son, it is her father who is aggressive. Look at him, just because he looks different, when he does what other little boys do, it becomes aggression. Then the principal told me, 'Dike is just like one of us, we don't see him as different at all.' What kind of pretending is that? I told him to look at my son. There are only two of them in the whole school. The other child is a half-caste, and so fair that if you look from afar you will not even know that he is black. My son sticks out, so how can you tell me that you don't see any difference? I refused completely that they should put him in a special class. He is brighter than all of them combined. They want to start now to mark him. Kemi warned me about this. She said they tried to do it to her son in Indiana." (A, 211)

This extended excerpt from Uju's speech to Ifemelu illustrates two peculiar features that white US society is seen to carry out against minorities. The first is stereotyping based on gender and, especially, race, starting from the youngest possible age. Indeed, there are two stereotypes being enforced against Dike as this point, i.e. black male aggressiveness and black intellectual inferiority. Dike behaves exactly like other (presumably) white children, but his behavior is automatically read as aggressive by his white teachers, because that is the expectation white society has of black males, as already exemplified in another quote from Ifemelu's blog: "And if you are a man, be hyper-mellow, never get too excited, or somebody will worry that you're about to pull a gun" (A, 274). A further illustration of the idea that black men must be inhumanly mellow in order not to be read as a threat is also contained in another one of Ifemelu's blog postings:

And what's a Magic Negro, you ask? The black man who is eternally wise and kind. He never reacts under great suffering, never gets angry, is never threatening. He always forgives all kinds of racist shit. He teaches the white person how to break down the sad but understandable prejudice in his heart. You see this man in many films. (A, 398)

Moreover, in regards to white American society's disbelief towards black achievement and excellence, Adichie has provided an example from her own experience as a university student in America to illustrate the stereotype:

I had come from a place where black achievement was normal. I had come from a place where authority figures were black. And to come to the US and, in my first writing class, to write the best essay, my professor was surprised when he said, "Who is Adichie?" - well, he called me Adichi, so, he thought I was maybe Italian-American from the name – and, then, he looked surprised. And it was just, sort of, one of those moments when I realized, "He's surprised because I'm black and he's surprised because he doesn't expect the best essay to be written by a black person." And it's one of those moments where, you know, it annoyed me, it amused me, because with my, you know, sort of, Nigerian smugness, I thought, "Surely he must know that black people are very intelligent."<sup>37</sup>

As a further point, Uju's speech also calls into question colorblind theory and its effectiveness. Colorblind theory and its limits have previously been examined in the section dedicated to intersectionality, therefore, with regards to this passage, it may suffice to note that Uju's reaction is indicative of the inefficacy of the theory. Denying Dike's physical difference from the majority of his classmates does nothing to aid him in facing the issues that inevitably affect him alone because of that difference. In Adichie's own words, one of the main themes of *Americanah* is indeed the idea of colorblind theory as dysfunctional:

We can't stop talking about skin color. This is the other thing I think this book is about, the idea that there's no such thing as colorblindness. I think it's just a – I think that to insist on colorblindness is somehow to refuse to engage, because, I mean, skin color really affects the way people experience the world and we can't deny that.<sup>38</sup>

The external imposition of negative baggage onto Dike's blackness continues well into his adolescence by well-meaning members of the community and even at the hands of his closest friends. When the school erroneously accuses him of hacking into their computer network, the following exchange takes place between Dike and Ifemelu:

"Why would they do this sort of rubbish?" Ifemelu asked. "You have to blame the black kid first," he said, and laughed. Later, he told her how his friends would say, "Hey, Dike, got some weed?" and how funny it was. He told her about the pastor at church, a white woman, who had said hello to all the other kids but when she came to him, she said, "What's up, bro?" "I feel like I have vegetables instead of ears, like large broccoli sticking out of my head," he said, laughing. "So of course it had to be me that hacked into the school network." (A, 432)

While Dike is seen to attempt to laugh it off, the psychological consequences on this continued stereotyping of his persona are dire. It is only later in the novel that his true state of mind on the treatment non-black American society reserves for his blackness is revealed, after his suicide attempt. Ifemelu attributes the depression that brought him to try to take his own life to his lack of a positive reference system for his blackness,

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37 "We should all be feminists | Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – Atria", 4:07.

38 "Author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on love, race and hair", 6:00.

especially in light of Uju's constant reminding him to not consider himself 'black': "You told him what he wasn't but you didn't tell him what he was" (A, 469). At this point, the shield of laughter wears off to reveal the protracted trauma underneath:

"His depression is because of his experience, Aunty!" [...] It was true that he laughed, and that his laughter convinced with its sound and its light, but it might have been a shield, and underneath, there might have been growing a pea plant of trauma. Now, in the shrill, silent aftermath of his suicide attempt, she wondered how much they had masked with all that laughter. (A, 470)

Obinze, on the other hand, serves not only as a witness of the often suffocating expectations tied to masculinity, but also as an example of a man who is willing to defy being caged in gender stereotypes. Indeed, Adichie says of Obinze that he is "a very romanticized character that I clearly am in love with"<sup>39</sup> and he is shown on multiple occasions to be outside of typical expectations of male dominance or male fear of female assertion. For example, very early on in the narration of their adolescence, Obinze is represented as not fearing Ifemelu's reputation as sharp-tongued and outspoken. Instead, it seems to be one of the fundamental qualities that drew him to her in the first place:

"[Kayode] said, 'Ifemelu is a fine babe but she is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees. But Ginika is just a sweet girl.'" He paused, then added, "He didn't know that was exactly what I hoped to hear. I'm not interested in girls that are too nice." [...] "You know I'm not insulting you." He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him gently; it was the first time their bodies had met and she felt herself stiffen. "I thought you were so fine, but not just that. You looked like the kind of person who will do something because you want to, and not because everybody else is doing it." (A, 72)

On a much later occasion, upon Ifemelu's return to Nigeria, she notes how his relaxed demeanor, his lack of need to assert his presence has not changed throughout the years:

He had filled out, from the slight boy of their university days to a fleshier, more muscled man, and perhaps because he had filled out, he seemed shorter than she remembered. In her high heels, she was taller than he was. She had not forgotten, but merely remembered anew, how understated his manner was, his plain dark jeans, his leather slippers, the way he walked into the bookshop with no need to dominate it. (A, 527-528)

Obinze's accepting, relaxed, non-performative demeanor are framed in contrast to the expectation of masculinity as a show of power and a subsequent fear of female power. The topic of masculinity being associated with dominance and assertiveness had already been discussed by Adichie in *We Should All Be Feminists*: "We spend too much time telling girls that they cannot be angry or aggressive or tough, which is bad enough, but

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39 "Chimamanda Adichie: Beauty Does Not Solve Problems", 4:47.

then we turn around and either praise or excuse men for the same reasons."<sup>40</sup> In the same speech, she says of the expectations of masculinity:

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. We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak, a *hard man*.<sup>41</sup>

The representation of Obinze's character goes against precisely this narrow expectation of masculinity. His narration, furthermore, allows the reader to witness through a male character's eyes a critique of the dominant expectations of the male gender. Indeed, Obinze is critical of a variety of stereotyped behaviors, starting from his co-workers' obsession with the objectification of women during his stay in the UK:

It amused Obinze, how keenly the men flipped through their newspapers every morning, stopping at the photo of the big-breasted woman, examining it as though it were an article of great interest, and were any different from the photo on that same page the previous day, the previous week. Their conversations, as they waited for their trucks to be loaded up, were always about cars and football and, most of all, women, each man telling stories that sounded too apocryphal and too similar to a story told the day before, the week before [...]. (A, 312)

The idea that the obsession with female sexual objectification is a performance to conform to perceived norms of masculinity rather than a natural behavior is already suggested in this passage. However, it is through the character of Nigel, as observed by Obinze, that the idea of gender performance is rendered explicit. As a matter of fact, Nigel, the youngest of the co-workers and the one who appears to have more difficulties in being accepted by the group of men, is no stranger to the telling of sexually graphic and degrading anecdotes in front of his co-workers. Nonetheless he later comes to admit that his stories were lies told for the sake of conforming:

"Truth is, I'm not really shagging Haley. I like her but I don't know how to tell her. The other day I went round her house and there was another bloke there." Nigel paused. Obinze tried to keep his face expressionless. "You look like you know what to say to the birds, mate," Nigel added. "Just tell her you like her," Obinze said, thinking how seamlessly Nigel, at the warehouse with other men, often contributed stories of his shagging Haley, and once of shagging her friend while Haley was away on holiday. "No games and no lines. Just say, Look, I like you and I think you're beautiful." (A, 315)

The difference in Obinze's attitude from that of his other co-workers is that he does not participate in the performance of gender and, most of all, does not degrade women for the sake of performance. His advice to Nigel is quite simply to relate to Haley as he

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40 Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 22.

41 Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists*, 24.

would to a human being.

Obinze is also profoundly critical of the expectations Kosi holds of his masculinity, from her expecting him to have automatically wanted a son instead of a daughter, to her idea that he will inevitably cheat on her given the opportunity, as if it were in his nature as a male. Kosi is portrayed as being unable to see beyond the stereotype of hypersexualized masculinity, blind to the complexity of Obinze as a person:

"Darling, your secretary should not let any of these bank marketing girls come into your office!" Kosi had said, as though she seemed no longer to see him, Obinze, and instead saw blurred figures, classic types: a wealthy man, a female banker who had been given a target deposit amount, an easy exchange. Kosi expected him to cheat, and her concern was to minimize the possibilities he might have. (A, 42)

If *Americanah* is to be considered a novel deeply concerned with themes of identity and, specifically the identities either assumed or imposed externally, the intersection of race (or, better yet, skin color) and gender may be viewed in the experiences of both Dike and Ifemelu, while Ifemelu and Obinze's narrations are both imbued in themes of gender as the performance of an identity. The value of characters such as Ifemelu and Obinze lies precisely in their profound complexity, their refusal to participate in the performance.

## 5. ADICHIE, FEMINISM AND POP CULTURE

After having considered Chimamanda Adichie's brand of feminism in the context of her works, it is equally important to discuss her public persona, as it is also through her presence in popular culture that she is able to convey her views. While the role of Nancy Fraser's recognition feminism has already been mentioned, in this section I intend to reiterate the idea of Adichie's feminism being made accessible precisely through her visibility. Indeed, it is through her public presence and voice, as well as her writing, that Adichie promotes her idea of diversity, a multiplicity of stories of Africa, of womanhood, and of black womanhood.

In *Feminism and Pop Culture*, author Andi Zeisler defines popular culture thus:

In a purely literal sense, popular culture is any cultural product that has a mass audience. [...] Historically, pop culture grew out of low culture, the uncouth counterpart to so-called high culture. If high culture comprised the art, literature, and classical music made by and for the world's educated elite, low culture was the baser stuff with

which the masses contented themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The accessibility of pop culture is nowadays much less determined by economic considerations - which would render it "available to anyone with the money to access it" (pos. 95) - since, not unlike the bridging of the gap between high and low culture, technological innovations continue to make it available to an ever wider audience. Its scope includes any visual, aural, or written material with a sufficiently large audience. In a technologically advanced landscape such as the present one, where the Internet can potentially connect societies worldwide, facets of popular culture from a variety of countries can interact and generate an ever wider audience. In light of the vast social breadth of popular culture, it is interesting to note what Zeisler states about its value for contemporary societies in shaping the way individuals view certain issues:

Like the disintegrating line between high and low culture, the distinctions between political and pop have also all but disappeared. Pop culture informs our understanding of political issues that on first glance seem to have nothing to do with pop culture; it also makes us see how something meant as pure entertainment can have everything to do with politics. (pos. 181)

Hence, popular culture is a construct that operates and influences through representation and its engagement with feminism, amongst other socio-political issues, is also enacted through representation. While the relationship between feminism and pop culture is often tense (e.g. the objectification of the male gaze in cinema and literature, the representation of women as reduced to tropes, such as the 'straw feminist', the 'good housewife', etc.), Adichie's self-presentation as a feminist in popular media is a direct example of how pop culture itself may prove a useful tool in making feminism accessible. As stated by Zeisler, "Pop culture is also a key route to making the concept of feminism [...] both resonant and relatable" (pos. 66).

Adichie's use of popular culture as a communicative tool and the representation of feminism and social issues she offers therein are articulated in a variety of media and content, both traditional (newspaper articles, interviews, adverts, etc.) and not (online media, music videos, etc.). It is precisely the lack of division between high and low culture which allows her to flow from *lectio magistralis* and fellowships to cosmetic adverts and music videos, gaining an even more significant and diverse viewership. Examples of her self-presentation and the representation made of her works and persona will now be examined in greater detail.

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<sup>1</sup> Andi Zeisler. *Feminism and Pop Culture (Seal Studies)* (Berkeley: Seal Press, Kindle edition, 2008), pos. 85.

As far as more traditional media is concerned, Adichie dividing her personal life between the US and Nigeria is reflected in her output of articles for both Nigerian and American news and entertainment outlets. One such article for *The Snoop* on the Same Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act has already been quoted, but her activity extends to several articles on *The New Yorker* headline as well, ranging from commentary on world events, to Q&A sessions, to short stories. Simultaneously, Adichie is also the object of article production for a vast number of headlines worldwide, the focus of which is often not the content of her books but rather the feminist and social debates she is able to spark through her media presence. One particular example, which also serves to show her television presence, concerns an interview for BBC Newsnight she appeared in in November 2016. During this interview, Adichie was called to provide her view on the US presidential election alongside R Emmett Tyrell Jr, Editor-in-chief of the *American Spectator* newspaper and supporter of newly-elected Republican president Donald Trump. BBC Newsnight's recording of the interview, uploaded on November 16, became a viral video on the Internet as a consequence of Adichie's shutting down Tyrell by stating that "If you're a white man, you don't get to define what racism is."<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterwards, on November 28, the article "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie slams BBC 'ambush' with Trump supporter" appeared on *The Guardian's* website, whereby a Facebook post by Adichie, where she accused the BBC of setting her up against a Trump supporter without her prior knowledge, was heavily quoted. Adichie is quoted as having stated that the idea to have her speak alongside Tyrell was for pure entertainment value: "It is a deliberately adversarial strategy that news organisations use in the pursuit of what is often called 'good television'. It is about entertainment."<sup>3</sup>

As a further example, Adichie's celebrity is not illustrated only through her words (e.g. in writing or speaking publicly), it also passes through her image, as shown by her presence in advertising and beauty magazines. While it has already been mentioned that in 2016 Adichie was chosen as a testimonial for the *Boots No7* line of cosmetics, Adichie has also been featured in high-profile fashion magazines such as *Vogue* (in the April 2015 issue) and *Vanity Fair* (where, in early 2017, she was named "one of the

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2 "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and R Emmett Tyrrell: Full debate - BBC Newsnight," YouTube video, 11:35, posted by BBC Newsnight, November 16, 2016, 9:39, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_LAUgq8KX4U&t=5s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LAUgq8KX4U&t=5s)>

3 Adichie, as quoted by Sian Cain. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie slams BBC 'ambush' with Trump supporter," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2016, accessed on May 29, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/28/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-slams-bbc-ambush-with-trump-supporter-newsnight>>

Style Stars set to Rule 2017"<sup>4</sup>). Outlets such as these include photographs of Adichie, often modelling either cosmetics or clothing. Simultaneously, her identification as a feminist is never presented as mutually exclusive to her love of traditional external markers of femininity: the attention thus drawn to Adichie's bodiliness and the care she dedicates to her appearance is once again indicative of her affinity to cultural feminism, which seeks to give value to traditionally feminine pursuits. Moreover, Adichie is quoted on multiple occasions as being attentive to the content and the power of women's beauty magazines in promoting standards for beauty, especially when the content of magazines veers towards whiteness as the only form of beauty regarded. An excerpt from *Americanah* serves to further illustrate:

"So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women's magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can't get clues for make-up from these magazines. [...] Now, let's talk about what is racially skewed. Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* [an American beauty magazine marketed for African American women] even exists?" (A, 365)

The representation of Adichie's person, of her appearance and sense of style, as aspirational on high-profile beauty magazines, therefore, is not just a statement of celebrity, but, as a dark-skinned woman, a step towards diversity in representation.

Nonetheless, Adichie's visibility has potentially less beneficial consequences, especially in consideration of her appearing in advertisement. Indeed, the connection between advertising and women as a target audience is a longstanding one:

Advertising has long been an aspect of pop culture whose focus is deliberately on women. Soap operas, for instance, got their name from the detergent manufacturers such as Procter & Gamble that created episodic melodramas that were broadcast on radio during the day, when housewives were most likely to be listening.<sup>5</sup>

While Zeisler's text tackles primarily the relations between American pop culture and women's movements, the link between marketing and women holds true even beyond US borders. An example brought forth by Adichie herself is that of the beauty industry creating and promoting a standardized image of beauty for women to conform to. As Zeisler states:

Pop culture has always been about commerce, and feminism and pop culture will always be uneasy bedfellows in a larger culture that remains conflicted (to say the very least) about how much power, agency, and autonomy women should have. A significant

4 Olamide Olarewaju. "Vanity Fair names Nigerian author as one 'the Style Stars Set to Rule 2017,'" *Pulse.ng*, Mar 3, 2017, accessed on May 29, 2017, <<http://pulse.ng/fashion/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-vanity-fair-names-nigerian-author-as-one-the-style-stars-set-to-rule-2017-id6311073.html>>

5 Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture*, pos. 132.

chunk of the advertising industry has always been devoted to reaching women, and in most cases its messages have instructed women to be on guard, lest they compromise their most important quality: their looks.<sup>6</sup>

The efficacy of the beauty industry's advertising relies on the insecurity generated within women by forcing them to dedicate a heightened state of attention to their body parts, as taken singularly: e.g. legs, skin, eyes, lips, nails, hair, etc. While the process of focalization on the single body part is at times also a feature of beauty advertising targeted towards men (e.g. perfume, body wash, hair dye, etc.), it remains to this day present in significantly smaller proportions. Moreover, advertising targeted towards men tends to focalize on the sense of confidence, prowess, or power achieved through the use of the product, whereas advertising geared towards women focalizes primarily on the desirability (and thus self-worth) the woman will obtain through the use of the product. Upon touching on the competitive nature implicit in the conceptions of femininity promoted by societal gender expectations and advertising, Brownmiller notes the following in her 1985 *Femininity*:

How one looks is the chief physical weapon in female-against-female competition. Appearance, not accomplishment, is the feminine demonstration of desirability and worth. In striving to approach a physical ideal, by corsetry in the old days or by a cottage-cheese-and-celery diet that begins tomorrow, one arms oneself to fight the competitive wars. Feminine armor is never metal or muscle but, paradoxically, an exaggeration of physical vulnerability that is reassuring (unthreatening) to men. Because she is forced to concentrate on the minutiae of her bodily parts, a woman is never free of self-consciousness. She is never quite satisfied, and never secure, for desperate, unending absorption in the drive for a perfect appearance – call it feminine vanity – is the ultimate restriction on freedom of mind.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, in light of the same mechanisms which Adichie contests within the beauty industry, one of the consequences of her partaking as a testimonial in a cosmetics advertising campaign or appearing on high-profile beauty magazine is that she enters the same circuits that she criticizes. Furthermore, while her image is undoubtedly a step towards more inclusive representation, its use for commercial purposes (through billboards or magazine covers) remains problematic. In this case, the question is whether a social message may truly retain its political impact when it is simultaneously being used for marketing purposes.

On a further note, considering the fourth wave of feminism heavily relies on online tools, it is fundamental to highlight that much of Adichie's visibility is also on digital media. Her speeches on the TED platform and her Facebook page have already been

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<sup>6</sup> Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture*, pos. 345.

<sup>7</sup> Brownmiller. *Femininity* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2013), 42.

mentioned, her visibility, however, extends even beyond platforms where it is she herself who is posting or speaking. For example, while Adichie does not have an official account on Tumblr, the popular blogging platform hosts hundreds of posts dedicated to reporting quotes and interviews, news, and discussion about her.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as of 8 May 2017, Adichie has launched her 'Wear Nigerian' project on Instagram, in order to promote Nigerian designers worldwide and help sustain Nigerian economy. She says on her Facebook page:

The Nigerian government's disastrous economic policies have led to a reduction in the value of the naira and therefore in disposable income, a change in values, a disorientation of the middle class, and most of all, to a debilitating sense of uncertainty. If we are to grasp for a silver lining, then the 'Buy Nigerian to Grow The Naira' rhetoric is one. [...] In the past few weeks, I've bought more Nigerian brands than I ever have in the past. I've discovered new names. I've been filled with admiration for the women and men running their businesses despite the many challenges they face. I'm particularly interested in 'inward-looking' brands, those for whom dressing Nigerian women is as important as other goals. [...] At the suggestion of my very au fait nieces Chisom and Amaka - who think Aunty is a hilarious luddite dinosaur (and they have a point, sadly) - I am now on Instagram at chimamanda\_adichie documenting my 'Wear Nigerian' project.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that, while she does not personally maintain the Instagram page, nor does she have a Tumblr account, her content nevertheless continues to circulate on these platforms signals how, because of the width of scope of the Internet, Adichie may initiate debate or conversation on one media and still enjoy widespread visibility. Adichie does not require special technological expertise in order to be part of the Internet-informed fourth wave of feminism, although she herself appears to be willing to reach out through the Internet.

Other outlets for Adichie's image and content, which are perhaps not traditionally associated to novelists according to the high/low culture divide, include the aforementioned sampling of *We Should All Be Feminists* by pop artist Beyoncé and the line of T-shirts of the same name created by Dior, for which a percentage of the sales will go to The Clara Lionel Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by another

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8 This refers to personal research conducted on the Tumblr platform by searching the words 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie' and viewing the results from most recent to oldest. One of the oldest posts with the tag 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie', a quote from *The Danger of a Single Story*, dated June 27, 2012, has received 268 notes (meaning it has been shared or 'liked' 268 times), whereas a significantly more recent one, an animated set of .GIF images from her August 2016 interview on the #BlackLivesMatter movement on Channel 4 News, dated August 9, 2016, has received a total 89,743 notes. Data retrieved on May 29, 2017 from <<https://www.tumblr.com/search/chimamanda+ngozi+adichie>>

9 Adichie. "My Project 'Wear Nigerian' on Instagram," Facebook post, May 8 2017, accessed on May 29, 2017, <<https://www.facebook.com/chimamandaadichie/>>

extremely popular singer, Rihanna.<sup>10</sup> The association of Adichie's name and message to highly popular brands such as Dior and famous music stars like Beyoncé and Rihanna allow Adichie to gain yet more visibility in pop culture, a visibility that makes her content accessible to an even wider audience, even through the simple, iconic value of a sentence such as "We should all be feminists."

## CONCLUSION

The present thesis has provided an analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work and public persona through the lens of fourth wave, intersectional and postcolonial feminism. This analysis has been conducted primarily by offering an overview of the history of feminism, its internal divisions and 'waves', and of intersectionality as a means of expanding dominant frameworks on social issues and oppression. Moreover, postcolonialism and particularly postcolonial feminism have been examined in order to locate the peculiarities of Adichie's engagement with Western culture and the Nigerian/African context, mainly in terms of representation. Indeed, the value of representation has been a recurring theme in this text, from the visibility of feminist engagement as a tool for accessibility to Adichie's own self-presentation and those she crafts for her characters.

While Adichie appears to reject academic feminism as fundamentally inaccessible, it has nonetheless proven useful to locate her in the greater context of what has been termed fourth wave feminism, given her visibility on a wide variety of both online and offline media and her open approach to the equality of diversity, which is a cornerstone of intersectional theory. While Adichie's message on the reductionist representation of Africa and her affinity with cultural feminism and intersectional theory are by no means original concepts, the efficacy of this message is carried out through her visibility, her choice to appear on a variety of platforms and media. Indeed, visibility may be considered a fundamental tool for accessibility insofar as it uses the channels created by popular culture to convey a message. Thus, while it may appear unusual for an award-winning novelist to dedicate an Instagram account to promoting Nigerian fashion or to

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10 Kristina Rodulfo. "Dior's 'We Should All Be Feminist' Shirts Will Benefit Rihanna's Charity," *Elle*, February 28, 2017, accessed on June 1, 2017, <<http://www.elle.com/fashion/news/a43431/dior-we-should-all-be-feminists-shirt-rihanna-charity/>>

appear in beauty magazines such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, it is nonetheless an act of diversity in representation for the image of a high-profile, non-white woman who engages with Western societies to be cast as aspirational. In addition, it proves to be a feminist act in reclaiming as valid those pursuits traditionally associated with femininity (such as fashion).

Finally, Adichie promotes the same diversity she conveys through her self-presentation in the crafting of the characters in her works. Her characters emerge as deeply conflicted, unique, complex individuals whose personal stories are nevertheless able to resonate on a wider scale. As stated by Adichie herself:

I am often told by Western journalists that my work is "universal." Sometimes this is said with some surprise, as if by setting a book in a small Nigerian town one risks losing the ability to be universal. I feel very strongly that it is from the specific that universalism arises, that it is through anchoring one's narrative in so-called parochial details that universalism becomes possible, and that it is therefore counterintuitive to make a distinction between *universalism* and *particularity*.<sup>1</sup>

Universalism is, therefore, not a question of shared cultural values, but rather a common ground of shared humanity. Indeed, humanity as a basic groundwork is able to reach beyond barriers of difference and show that diversity need not be met with fear or suspicion, but merely as an expression of the multifaceted nature of mankind. Adichie elaborates thus:

We need to conceive of a world in which the idea of difference is just that: *difference*, rather than something necessarily better or worse. I am obviously biased, but I think that literature is one of the best ways to come closer to the idea of a common humanity, to see that we may be kind and unkind in different ways, but that we are all capable of kindness and unkindness.<sup>2</sup>

It is so that her characters may be defined "fierce consumers of life", different, diverse individuals who nonetheless deeply resonate within the reader on the basis of a common humanity. Adichie achieves a sense of common humanity in her works in different manners: through the foregrounding of the body in sexuality and violence, such as in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, through a series of contrasts through which personal experience may evolve, as in *Purple Hibiscus*, through the common representation of love and loss and the normalization of same-sex love in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and, finally, through distance, displacement, and yearning for love in *Americanah*. Experience may pertain to the realm of the particular, but emotion is a common human ground and it is so that Adichie's "fierce consumers" achieve the possibility of reader identification and

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1 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience," 48.

2 Adichie, "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience," 46.

recognition while still maintaining their diversity in representation.

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