

# Some reflections on selected themes in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction and her feminist manifesto

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction, namely, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* generally reflects an intersection of black women's experiences in a variety of contexts. In Adichie's fiction, motifs that feature in the domain of identity politics and gender discourse are brought into critical focus. Among these motifs are appraisals of African names, stereotyping complexions, racialisations of hair and other themes such as the commodification of the female body. In Adichie's fiction, these aspects are thematised as key features of black women's identity and therefore worth considering in identity politics and gender discourse. In this article, Adichie's *Dear Ijeawele or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* is relied upon as a summary of her authorial vision, ideology and feminist outlook. This article appreciates how Adichie seeks to reposition postcolonial hermeneutics on black women's identity by bringing to light some challenges that are faced by these women in her fiction. Adichie's fiction is appraised for its aim to widen the contemporary African critique-scape on racial, gender and identity issues.

**Keywords:** beauty; blackness; feminism; identity; womanhood.

## Introduction

Feminists have been raising numerous challenges which impact directly and indirectly on women's empowerment (Nkealah 2015). The challenges that women face include, among others, economic stagnation, underdevelopment in rural areas, poor education, poor transport systems, poor communication systems, violence against women and girls, ineffective legal systems, rural-urban migration, brain drain, as well as cultural and religious practices – including early marriage for girls and female genital mutilation – that continue to subject women to patriarchal control (Nkealah 2015). In literary circles, literary criticisms are thematising women disenfranchisement which has been perpetuated under the veneer of African cultural identity (Ramohlale, Chauke & Mogoboya 2021). In an effort to concurrently highlight and address these challenges, there has been an emergent trend in fiction that seeks to reposition postcolonial hermeneutics on gender discourse (Etim 2019). This repositioning entails mainly prescriptions of transformative models on the depiction of female characters in literature and other modes of representation (Ramohlale et al. 2021).

One of the people who have been particularly emphatic on the need to challenge and correct cultural stereotypes that are imposed on women on the basis of gender is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In essence, Adichie's novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), *Americanah* (2013) and her collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), thematise her authorial vision and ideology, which are set towards 'deconstructing' patriarchal structures and realising gender equality. This article analyses Adichie's prose, utilising her *Dear Ijeawele or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017) as a lynchpin upon which she bases her articulation of feminism and femininity. The manifesto is mainly Adichie's response to Ijeawele, who had just given birth to a girl and needed to know how she could raise her daughter as a feminist. Adichie may have submitted her manifesto to Ijeawele as merely a list of suggestions, but at a close inspection, the manifesto actually summarises the recurrent themes of her prose. The 15 suggestions that Adichie submits in her manifesto are:

- (a) 'Be a full person'; (b) Parents should share child care equally; child-rearing is not for mothers only; (c) 'Girls and boys should be taught that the idea of gender roles is absolute nonsense'; (d) 'Beware of Feminism Lite – the idea of conditional female equality'; (e) 'Teach girls to read'; (f) 'Teach girls to question language'; (g) 'Never speak of marriage as an achievement'; (h) 'Teach girls to reject likeability'; (i) 'Give girls a sense of identity'; (j) 'Be deliberate about how you engage with girls and their appearance'; (k) 'Teach girls to question culture's selective use of biology as "reasons" for social norms'; (l) 'Talk to girls about sex and start early'; (m) 'Make sure you are aware of the romance in her life'; (n) 'In teaching her about oppression, be careful not to turn the oppressed into saints'; (o) 'Teach her about difference'. (Adichie 2017)

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For analytical convenience, only seven of Adichie's 15 suggestions are synthesised in the analysis of the selected texts, namely, be a full person, give girls a sense of identity and be deliberate about how you engage with girls and their appearance, teach girls to read and question language, teach girls to never perceive marriage as an achievement and to reject likeability. In the analysis, it is shown that Adichie draws her themes from the daily experiences of black women in Africa and in settings far removed from Africa, such as America and England. One would think that the varied challenges that women face, as cited in the opening remarks of this article, would form the crux of Adichie's feminist manifesto. On the contrary, Adichie thematises issues that are easy to ignore or trivialise, particularly because they are not necessarily 'ground-breaking' but are important to consider in the discourse on identity and its attendant politics. Such issues include, but are not limited to, appraisals of onomastic renaissance<sup>1</sup> in Africa, challenging stereotypic perceptions of black women's physiognomy,<sup>2</sup> confronting the racialisation of black women's hair and defying ideologies that perpetuate women's commodification.<sup>3</sup> In this article, these aspects are intersected with the selected seven suggestions and are relied upon to reflect on Adichie's authorial vision and ideology in her prose.

## Appraisals of African names in Adichie's fiction

Adichie's first suggestion to Ijeawele is that if she (Ijeawele) wants to raise her daughter as a feminist, she must ensure liberation of her daughter to experience 'full personhood' (Adichie 2017:9). For Adichie, full personhood entails assigning African names to African children. African names are important to Adichie, not only because of their semantic and philosophical value (Mağadzhe 2018; N̄mukongwe 1995), but also because assigning African names to African children is a political act. Furthermore, African names are important to Adichie because, names, better than any other language form, reflect various social and other attitudes and relationships, social barriers, and the way in which social groups behave towards languages and other aspects of society (Neethling 2000).

Adichie not only appreciates the possibilities of linguistic creativity through name-giving among Africans, but also aims to show that name-giving in Africa often has personal and communal importance. By thematising onomastic creativity among Africans in her fiction, Adichie implicates what Neethling (2000) regards as 'onomastic renaissance'.

1.The process by which African naming and renaming illustrate the (re) conceptualisation and (re)assertion of African identity after colonial subjugation. In this study, this process is evinced by how Adichie deliberately assigns African (Igbo) names to her characters and also projects most of these characters fighting for the recognition and preservation of these names. In the process, Adichie proffers that African names are at par with European names in terms of semantic and philosophical value, and therefore should not be relegated to a junior position.

2.In this article, the term is used to refer to a practice of judging someone's character and concluding on such a person's ethnic origin based on his or her facial features and complexion.

3.Reference is made here to the action or process of treating girls and women as mere commodities or objects of trade.

Onomastic renaissance is vital because in the colonial era, Africans were deliberately denied the freedom to practise their traditions and cultural values as they were regarded as barbaric practices and values of uncivilised people (Mandende & Mashige 2018). Makondo (2013:12) concurs that 'the colonization of many parts of the world ... significantly affected world anthroponomastic trends'. By desecrating African names and replacing them with names of exotic origin, early settlers injected an alien anthroponymy into African culture (Neethling 2000). Therefore, Adichie foregrounds the concept of 'onomastic renaissance' because it connotes a reconsideration of some of those features of African identity and philosophy that are embedded in African anthroponymy<sup>4</sup> which were once repressed or trivialised during the colonial era.

In the first place, Adichie instantiates her protest against the desecration of African names by deliberately assigning African (Igbo) names to most of her (female) characters. She does this mainly for four reasons: (1) black women should agentively resist the desecration of their African names; instead, they should consider these names as essential features of their African identity; (2) African names are at par with English names in terms of semantic and philosophical value; therefore, they should not be treated as if they have lesser value; (3) if black women concede to an abandonment of their African names, even by a perfunctory compromise, they will lose the autonomy of self-identification and (4) women's use of their African names is coterminous with the freedom to subvert Eurocentric notions held by some European missionaries that African names are 'barbaric'.

The foregoing reasons are best exemplified by Amaka in *Purple Hibiscus*, who consistently protests suggestions that she should pick an English baptismal name (Adichie 2004:204). Amaka refuses to take an English baptismal name because 'when the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized' (Adichie 2004:204). Adichie uses Amaka to challenge European missionaries' belief that non-Europeans in Africa needed to be 'civilised' and that they (missionaries) possessed the power to bring about this civilisation to Africans. For these missionaries, the process of 'civilisation' entailed the desecration of African names and practices. Adichie not only challenges the missionaries' stance against African names and practices, but also confronts Africans who side with the missionaries on this issue. Ifeoma (Amaka's mother) sides with Father Amadi and tells Amaka: 'pick a name and let Father Amadi go and do his work'. Amaka, however, remains resolute:

But what's the point, then? What the church is saying is that only an English name will make your confirmation valid. 'Chiamaka' says God is beautiful. 'Chima' says God knows best, 'Chiebuka' says God is the greatest. Don't they all glorify God as much as 'Paul' and 'Peter' and 'Simon'? (Adichie 2004:272)

4.A branch of onomastics that studies the proper names of human beings, both individual and collective.

Amaka's recalcitrance exasperates Ifeoma, provoking an outburst: 'You don't have to prove a senseless point here! Just do it and get confirmed, nobody says you have to use the name!' To which Amaka responds: 'I do not agree' (Adichie 2004:272). Amaka's mother misses the point, which is that African names glorify God the same way some English baptismal names do. The fact that African names are not only beautiful and meaningful, but also glorify God as some English names do is pervasive in most of Adichie's works. For example, in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, 'Chinaza' and 'Nkiruka' mean 'God answers prayers' and 'what is ahead is better', respectively (Adichie 2009:73, 180). When Tracy asked what the name 'Kamara' means, Kamara said: 'It's a short form of Kamarachizuoroanyi: 'May God's Grace Be Sufficient For Us' (Adichie 2009:89). Tracy responds: 'It's beautiful, it's like music', and:

[K]amara imagined Tracy saying that again, this time in her ear, in a whisper. *Kamara, Kamara, Kamara*, she would say while their bodies swayed to the music of her name. (Adichie 2009:89 [original italics])

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the names Olanna and Kainene mean 'God's Gold' and 'Let's watch and see what next God will bring', respectively (Adichie 2006:58). In *Americanah*, Obinze's mother translates Ifemelu's full name, 'Ifemelumamma ... Beautifully Made or Made-in-Good-Times' (Adichie 2013:83). For Adichie, African names are so numerous that Ujunwa (a female character who is a writer) even struggles to decide between naming her character 'something common, like Chioma, or something exotic, like Ibari' (Adichie 2009:100). *The Thing Around Your Neck* also shows that some Africans may memorialise the name of their god(s) by assigning a child the name of that god. In the short story 'The Headstrong Historian', a child is named 'Anikwenwa: [meaning] the earth god Ani had finally granted a child' (Adichie 2009:202). Adichie uses characters like Amaka and Nwamgba to urge black women to protest the notion of baptismal names, especially when baptismal names are suggested as superior replacements of African names.

When Anikwenwa introduced the woman he wanted to marry to his mother, Nwamgba, she asked what the woman's name was and was told that it was 'Agnes', but 'Nwamgba asked for the girl's real name', and learnt that 'Mgbeke' was the woman's name before she became a Christian (Adichie 2009:212). When Mgbeke gave birth to a boy, 'Father O'Donell baptized him Peter, but Nwamgba called him Nnamdi' (Adichie 2009:214). When Mgbeke gave birth to a girl, 'Father O'Donell baptized her Grace, but Nwamgba called her Afamefuna, "My Name Will Not Be Lost"' (Adichie 2009:214). Later on, when Grace felt 'an odd rootlessness', she changed her first name from Grace to 'Afamefuna' (Adichie 2009:218). Thus, through female characters such as Amaka, Nwamgba, Ujunwa, Kamara, Afamefuna and others who celebrate their Igbo names, Adichie nudges African women towards recognising their African names as essential features of their selfhood. In this way, Adichie wants black women to seriously consider celebrating their own African names and also assigning African names to their children. This, to Adichie, is

not only a declaration of 'Africanness', but also a protest against Eurocentric lordship over African onomastics.

Apart from European missionaries' desecration of African names, the pressure to conform to an American lifestyle and the need to prosper in such a setting is yet another factor that Adichie regards as responsible for the marginalisation of African names. In the short story 'The Arrangers of Marriage', the pressure to conform to American life caused Ofodile Emeka Udenwa to change his last name to 'Bell' because 'Americans have a hard time with Udenwa' (Adichie 2009:172). Ofodile also changed his wife Chinaza Okafor's name to 'Agatha Bell' because 'if you want to get anywhere [in America] you have to be as mainstream as possible' (Adichie 2009:172–173). Adichie opposes this notion by appreciating and translating even 'unusual' Igbo names such as Ranyinudo. Ranyinudo was 'fondly called Leave Me in Peace' because of how often she would say, whenever asked about her unusual name, 'Yes, it is an Igbo name and it means "leave us in peace," so you can leave me in peace!' (Adichie 2013:32). Nwamgba, Amaka and Ranyinudo symbolise African women who not only defend the value of their names, but also assertively stage protests against the lingering effects of colonisation. In *Dear Ijeawele* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie's emphasis on the semantic value of African names is also notable: 'What joy. And what lovely names: Chizalum Adaora' (Adichie 2017:7); 'Chiamaka: God is beautiful' (Adichie 2006:254). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili is grateful, to begin with, that the 'iconoclastic' Father Amadi 'had said *my name*, that he remembered *my name*' (Adichie 2004:164 emphasis added). Adichie emphasises the point that (black) women's self-empowerment includes taking pride in their African names, which would set them on a trajectory that leads to 'full personhood'.

## Challenging stereotypic perceptions of black women's physiognomy

From her appraisals of African names, Adichie progresses to the racialisation of black women's complexion as a stereotyped and idealised standard of beauty or lack thereof. In *Americanah*, Kosi, 'a beautiful woman' whose 'complexion' glowed, is complimented by her husband, Obinze, and laughs:

'the same way she laughed, with an open, accepting enjoyment of her own looks, when people asked her "Is your mother white? Are you half-caste?" because she was so fair-skinned'. (Adichie 2013:22)

Still, in *Americanah*, a lighter skin tone is stereotyped as beautiful. In this novel, Adichie uses Obinze to show how discomfited she is with women like Kosi who take pleasure 'in being mistaken for mixed race' because to such women, a light complexion is the ultimate feature of attractiveness and beauty (Adichie 2013:22). When one woman asked Kosi, 'in an accusing tone, "What cream do you use on your face? How can one person have this kind of perfect skin?"' (Adichie 2013:28), Kosi simply laughed graciously and promised to send the woman a text message with details of her skin-care

routine (Adichie 2013:28). Kosi's questioners assume that her light skin tone emanates from using 'cream', which implies that black women can only be light-skinned if they are 'half-caste' or when they use lighter basecoat make-up and/or skin lightening products. Other than that, it seems African women are all supposed to be *dark skinned*.

Adichie shores up this stereotype because she views it as responsible for the prejudicial treatment of black women on the basis of their varied degrees of skin tone. To this end, among some people, light-skinned women are perceived as beautiful whereas dark-skinned women are labelled as ugly (Makobela 2019; Motseki 2019). In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Nnamibia (a boy) is simultaneously admired and denigrated for his 'honey-fair complexion' by the traders who also shout at his mother, 'Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is the boy doing with all this beauty?' (Adichie 2009:6). Implicit in these questions is the stereotype that a fair skin, irrespective of whether it is natural or as a result of 'whitening' (Motseki 2019:7), is considered a mark of beauty – beauty that is only acceptable on women, and not men.

In *Americanah*, stereotypes ascribed to skin colour are also highlighted as a determinant of ethnicity when Aisha (a Senegalese woman), who upon learning that Ifemelu is Igbo, disputes it by saying, 'I think you [sic] Yoruba because you [sic] dark and Igbo [sic] fair' (Adichie 2013:14 emphasis added). Aisha's basis for this stereotyped assumption is that she was dating two Igbo men. Through Aisha, Adichie confirms that stereotypes appended to skin colour do not only exist between distinct races, but also within the same racial group (Makobela 2019). In the short story, 'A Private Experience', Chika wonders if the woman looking at her can tell, 'from her light complexion ... that she is Igbo' (Adichie 2009:44), which in itself affirms that skin colour is the main basis of stereotyped ethnic categorisations. Adichie's fiction seeks to debunk this notion.

Also entrenched in the values attached to skin colour is the protracted effect of the colonisation of Africans, where skin pigmentation served as a basis for social stratification (Makobela 2019). Colonisation seems to have resulted in the internalised bias that one skin tone (white and light) is better than the other (dark). Seemingly, this led to some black women opting for 'Black Erasure' (Motseki 2019). Both Motseki (2019) and Makobela (2019) agree that in South Africa, 'Black Erasure' is impelled, among other factors, by the celebrity and media peddling of 'whiteness'. This peddling distils into the idealisation of light skin tones as epitomes of beauty which dark-skinned women should perceive as aspirational. Motseki and Makobela also expose a nuanced perception of light skin tones as helpful to the attainment of a higher social status. Consequently, some black women are said to go to great lengths to measure up to the skin tone of women who are colloquially referred to as 'yellow bones' (Makobela 2019:7). This social framing phenomenon of female beauty is captured in the short story

'Jumping Monkey Hill', where one woman is referred to by other characters as the 'Yellow Woman' and never by her name (Adichie 2009:104–105).

A light skin tone also plays a role in the selection of a mate, particularly in America where 'colourism undermines the identity of African American women with a dark skin by creating a perception that lighter-skinned African Americans have higher levels of confidence' (Makobela 2019). In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Ofodile tells his wife Chinaza that: 'I was happy when I saw your picture, you were light-skinned. I had to think about my children's looks. Light-skinned blacks fare better in America' (Adichie 2009:184). Couched in this notion is the reality that black women are still judged disproportionately based on complexion and have their phenotypes used to affirm presumptions about their ability and competence (Makobela 2019). In Adichie's prose, one realises that a light skin tone is idealised, not only as a normative definition or perception of beauty, but also as a 'plausible' means for elevation in socio-economic hierarchies.

Kosi illustrates the entrenchment of the foregoing notion when she does not protest against phenotypic stereotypes ascribed to her natural, light complexion. On the contrary, she chooses to 'enjoy' the admiration from other (rich) people because it grants her access to their 'world'. Kosi believes that her access to upper echelons of society requires the repression of her true feelings, even when stereotyped and disdainful remarks are made about her complexion. Kosi typifies some black women in Africa and in the diaspora, who although 'basking in the attention that [their] face[s] drew' still flatten their 'personality so that [their] beauty did not threaten' (Adichie 2013:28). Adichie castigates Kosi as a way of urging black women towards celebrating the beauty of their natural skin, irrespective of whether dark or light-complexioned.

That Adichie seeks to foster a sense of 'pride' among black women by accentuating positive connotations of 'Blackness' is evident through Nkem whose 'face has always made people talk – how perfectly oval it is, *how flawless her dark skin*' (Adichie 2009:28 emphasis added). In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Olanna's mother is said to have had a 'dark-skinned face that was so nearly perfect, so symmetrical, that friends called her Art' (Adichie 2006:31). Thus, for Adichie, subverting what she considers to be stereotyped designations of black women's beauty is a major step towards the emancipation and empowerment of black women in Africa and beyond. For Adichie, emancipation from idealised standards of beauty essentially involves black women being comfortable in their own skin. In Adichie's view, if black women are comfortable in their own skin, they will actively resist all forms of pressure into participating in the processes of self-alterations for the purposes of conforming to idealised notions of beauty.

## Challenging the racialisation of black women's hair

Adichie also thematises various stereotypical perceptions of black women's hair. In light of these perceptions, Adichie

uses characters such as Wambui and Ifemelu in *Americanah* as examples of black women who are proud of their natural hair. These characters are used to encourage black women to love their natural hair, which is shown by Ifemelu who reveres her mother's hair in *Americanah*:

It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. My father called it a crown of glory. (Adichie 2013:41)

Ifemelu is also quick, however, to reveal that apart from her being a victim of phenotypical stereotypes, 'strangers would ask [her mother], and then reach out to touch it [her hair] reverently. Others would say 'Are you from Jamaica? as though only foreign blood could explain such bounteous hair that did not thin at the temples' (Adichie 2013:41). In the short story *The Thing Around Your Neck* (Adichie 2009), Akunna comments on how a black woman's bounteous hair would be marvelled at:

[T]hey gawped at your hair. Does it stand up or fall down when you take out braids? They wanted to know. All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb? (p. 115)

In response, a black woman merely 'smiled tightly when asked those questions' (Adichie 2009:116). For black women in diasporic settings, these questions are also normalised as an 'added dimension of the racial degradation of black women' (Nkealah 2015:65). Also inherent in the stereotype is the assumption that African women cannot or do not have such bounteous, beautiful and natural hair, and that in the instances that they do have such hair, it is a cause for patronising curiosity. Through Ifemelu's appraisal of her mother's natural hair, Adichie nudges black women towards taking an assertive stance in accepting and appraising their natural hair, even amongst people who doubt the authenticity of the very hair that naturally grows from their heads.

Black women's appreciation of their 'organic' hair texture is essential in the valuation of their selfhood. Adichie wants black women to love their own natural hair because there were still some black women who went to great lengths 'to straighten their hair ... because they wanted to look like white people, although the combs ended up burning their hair off' (Adichie 2006:19). For such black women, measuring up to the idealised standards of beauty involves even enduring possibilities of scalp burn. Adichie's point here is that a certain bravado is still needed by most black women to wear their natural hair. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie criticises black women for wearing wigs instead of their natural hair. This is evident in her allusion to a bald (black) woman whose wig was blown off her head by the wind and also Nneoma, who wore a wig but kept 'smacking her head' because her scalp was itchy (Adichie 2013:26).

Nneoma had to smack her head because her wig hindered her from scratching it. Adichie proffers that this can be avoided if both the bald woman and Nneoma avoided wearing the wig altogether. The struggle to measure up to idealised standards

of beauty may also be reflective of how colonialism tarnished some black women's perception of self-beauty. Another factor that circumscribes black women from wearing their natural hair in Adichie's prose is religion. In *Americanah*, Sister Ibinabo symbolises the sanctimonious and domineering nature of religion, which also extends to the repression of young girls' freedom of expression. Sanctimonious religion, as personified by Sister Ibinabo, is hostile towards young girls like Christie who wear tight trousers. Sister Ibinabo tells Christie that her wearing tight trousers depicts her desire 'to commit the sin of temptation', to which Christie nods, 'humble, gracious and carrying her shame' (Adichie 2013:50). Ifemelu not only exposes the corruption prevalent in the church but also objects to religion's desire to spread that 'poisonous spite' claimed as 'religious guidance', which to Ifemelu is essentially a cloak over women's desires for self-expression (Adichie 2013:51).

After 'receiving Jesus', Ifemelu's mother was compelled to cut her hair because as a 'saved' woman, she was not supposed to have bounteous hair (Adichie 2013:41). When Ifemelu's mother cut her hair, it was, to Ifemelu, equivalent to 'her mother's essence taking flight' (Adichie 2013:42). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa (Eugene) hugged Kambili, expressing his pride, because Father Benedict had told him that Kambili's 'hair was always properly covered for Mass' and that she:

[W]as not like other young girls in the church who let some of their hair show, as if they did not know that showing your hair in church was ungodly. (Adichie 2004:100)

Therefore, religious repression shores up in Adichie's prose as one of the reasons why some black women do not love their natural hair. In her fiction, Adichie hopes that in the instances where black women are asked and told, 'What did you do to your hair? It doesn't suit you at all', they will be able to respond assertively: 'I quite like it' (Adichie 2006:44). This assertiveness was demonstrated by Ifemelu when Aisha touched her hair and asked, 'Why don't you have a relaxer?' Ifemelu said, 'I like my hair the way God made it' (Adichie 2013:12).

## Defying ideologies that perpetuate women's commodification

Adichie's prose also represents confrontations of patriarchy and women's commodification while at the same time appraising women's militancy. In *Purple Hibiscus*, for example, the commodification of women is evinced when one woman tells Jaja: 'If we did not have the same blood in our veins, I would sell you my daughter' (Adichie 2004:91). Underscored here is the notion that 'the female body becomes simply a commodity to be secured by the highest bidder' (Nkealah 2008:10). Here, women and girls are depicted as the prerogative of men like Chief Okonji 'who walked around in a cloud of cologne-drenched entitlement, with the presumption that because [*he was*] powerful and found her [*Olanna*] beautiful, they belonged together' (Adichie 2006:33). The commodification of women is often accompanied by the sexualisation of the female body, evidenced when one woman

looks at Kambili and says: 'The girl is ripe! Very soon a strong young man will bring his palm wine' (Adichie 2004:91–92). This ideology not only reduces women and girls 'to the level of commodities' (Nkealah 2008:4), but also conditions girls to aspire for nothing but likeability and marriageability in the eyes of men (Adichie 2017). Hence, Adichie (2017) suggests to Ijeawele that:

[W]e also need to question the idea of marriage as a prize to women, because that is the basis of these absurd debates. If we stop conditioning women to see marriage as a prize, then we would have fewer debates about a wife needing to cook in order to earn that prize. (p. 16)

One female character in Adichie's prose who wanted to pass the likeability and marriageability test is Kosi. Apparently, Kosi once 'leaped up to help with serving food' and was offended afterwards when Obinze's mother made to clean: 'Mummy, how can I be here and you will be cleaning?' (Adichie 2013:28). Kosi's desire to pass the likeability and marriageability tests is solely premised on what she perceives as skilfulness in performing domestic chores. Adichie disagrees with this perception and suggests to Ijeawele that she should teach her daughter Chizalum that domestic work in general is a life skill that both men and women should ideally have (Adichie 2017). This notion is unknown to Kosi's female friends who envy her because her husband, Obinze, 'behaved like a foreign husband, the way he made her breakfast on weekends and stayed at home every night' (Adichie 2013:30). Kosi's friends find it strange that a husband makes breakfast for his wife because to them, cooking is a woman's responsibility and never a man's.

When Ugwu wanted to cook, Odenigbo's mother refused and said: 'I know you try, but you are only a boy. What does a boy know about real cooking?' (Adichie 2006:94). Amala, a girl, was asked by Odenigbo's mother, 'Does a boy belong to the kitchen?' and she responded, 'No'. When Ugwu could not slice *ugu* (pumpkin leaf), Odenigbo's mother said, 'You see why boys have no business in the kitchen? You cannot even slice *ugu*' (Adichie 2006:96). At Abba, Kambili notices that it was 'the wives of the members of our *ummuna* [who] came to do the cooking' (Adichie 2004:56). These quotations are only reflective of how gender roles are inscribed in girls like Amala. Against this inscription, Adichie (2017) suggests to Ijeawele that she should teach her daughter to question culture's selective use of biology as 'reasons' for social norms.

For Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, their commodification is notable when their father uses them 'as sex baits' for the procurement of business contracts (Adichie 2006:35). Also, the story about Eberechi in *Half of a Yellow Sun* 'was that her parents had given her to a visiting army officer, as one would give kola nut to a guest' (Adichie 2006:216). Eberechi's parents forced her to sleep with this army officer because 'he helped us. He put my brother in essential services in the army' (Adichie 2006:294). The army officer, it seems, was entitled to an offering of Eberechi's body as a token of appreciation for his 'generosity'. In *Americanah*, when a man

and his girlfriend visited Chief, he (Chief) told the man, 'I like that girl. Give her to me and I will give you a nice plot of land in Ikeja' (Adichie 2013:30). To Chief, women are commodities that can be traded for a plot of land.

In the patriarchal topography, even strong women like Nneoma may, for the purposes of stroking Chief's ego, listen to him smiling with 'her animation exaggerated, as though a bigger smile and a quicker laugh, each ego-burnish shinier than the last, would ensure that Chief would help them' (Adichie 2013:25). In this case, Nneoma symbolises women, who despite their success, strength and intelligence, still resort to 'frank flirtations' with 'the patriarchal ego' in order to receive help both for themselves and for others (Adichie 2013:25). Through Nneoma, Adichie highlights that women's flirtations with patriarchy will never deconstruct patriarchy; the deconstruction of the patriarchal system requires radical confrontations. This is why Adichie encourages women to never assume a subjugated and agreeable posture before the patriarchal system and its attendant ideologies.

Attributions of militancy to female characters in Adichie's prose mainly portend an assertive resistance to oppression and patriarchy. For instance, female characters like Ifemelu are liberated to confront the repressive and domineering nature of religion, even when it entails being accused of insubordination. This militancy is also notable when Obinze's mother challenges a male professor who slapped her at a time when it was unconventional for 'women who were professors' to fight back (Adichie 2013:55). Obinze's mother, like Olanna, refuses to 'brush her humiliation aside in the name of overexalted intellectualism' and claims her right to be angry at injustice and abuse (Adichie 2006:102). In solidarity with Obinze's mother, 'some of her female students went and printed Full Human Being on T-shirts' (Adichie 2013:59). This sort of demonstrative solidarity is not only reflective of women's struggle against patriarchal abuse in a variety of contexts, but also that, it would take more than one woman to deconstruct the whole system. For this reason, Adichie encourages women to unite against patriarchal repression and abuse.

In ascribing militancy to women, Adichie ensures that her female characters are not the kind to whom the likes of Ugwu (in *Half of a Yellow Sun*) may attribute 'quietness, delicacy' or the kind of women 'whose sneeze, whose laugh and talk, would be as soft as the under-feather closest to the chicken's skin'. On the contrary, the women that Ugwu 'saw at the supermarket and on the streets were different ... they were not delicate stalks of grass. They were loud' (Adichie 2006:19). The loudness of such women's voices is noted in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, where Olanna and Kainene speak back to patriarchal sexism like Chief Okonje. Female characters such as Kambili, Beatrice, Ifemelu, Olanna, Kainene, Nneoma, Obinze's mother, Uju, Chioma, Ifeoma, Amaka, Nwamgba, Ayaju and Nnambia's mother in *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and *The Thing Around Your Neck*, although located within repressive and patriarchal contexts, still emerge as assertive, intelligent and militant. Such women

include the likes of Ifemelu who, although 'a fine babe', 'is too much trouble. She can argue. She can talk. She never agrees' (Adichie 2013:60). Adichie's female characters essentially seek freedom, 'a different kind of freedom ... a freedom to be, to do' (Adichie 2004:16). In Adichie's mind, this freedom to be and to do is attainable by adopting a form of 'assertive feminism'. Adichie opts for female militancy and agency because she believes that women often live in spaces often characterised by the normalisation of their invisibility (Nkealah 2015).

Adichie's assignment of power to her female characters is intended to stage an active resistance to 'the traditional view that men are psychologically and physically superior' to women (Cloete & Maqadze 2007:38). This is why the women in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *The Thing Around Your Neck* demonstrate their militancy by being actively involved in the Biafra war, religious and ethnic wars, respectively. These women do not watch the world around them through a detached lens. On the contrary, they 'thrust a fist in the air' and shout, 'Give us guns!' (Adichie 2006:171). Adichie's female characters can 'spit at a soldier' in defiance (2004:44). The women in Adichie's prose also organise rallies, seminars and talk 'about the win-the-war effort' (Adichie 2006:185). These are women like Kainene, who is among the 'women who went across enemy lines to trade' and also distributed food to the refugees (Adichie 2006:282).

Kainene does not believe in folding her arms and waiting for aid; she instead declares: 'We will grow our own protein, soya beans...'. (Adichie 2006:318). Even in description, women like Mama Dozie, 'a fierce woman' and Kainene, 'a very strong woman', are portrayed as possessing the certitude to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with men in the war (Adichie 2006:192, 271). Adichie highlights Ifeoma, who according to Kambili, 'walked just like one who knew where she was going and what she was going to do there. And she spoke the way she walked' (Adichie 2004:71). In this way, Adichie (2017:8) vocalises one of her suggestions in her feminist manifesto: 'I matter. I matter equally'. In Adichie's prose, even Olanna's 'soft voice' could 'change into something fierce' (Adichie 2006:240). Beatrice, whose lips were compressed by Eugene's stern patriarchal control and religious fanaticism, eventually becomes defiant. Women like Grace combat psychological and cultural estrangement and concurrently repossess the power to rename themselves. Adichie's prose registers the female voice's pitch even through a 4-year-old baby who 'speaks in a high voice' (Adichie 2006:169). Even the 'tongue-tied' Kambili, whose life was characterised by voicelessness, is called upon by both Amaka and Ifeoma to speak back when mistreated: 'Why do you lower your voice? ... Talk back to her!' (Adichie 2004:49). The foregoing discussion should be taken as a summary of some of the important themes that distinguish Adichie's voice within the domains of feminist discourse in the contemporary context. For Adichie, black women's emancipation from patriarchal, cultural, religious repression and stereotypic perceptions is dependent upon

black women's confrontation of and resistance to these practices. More importantly, black women's valuation and celebration of their African names is essential in the expression of their selfhood.

## Conclusion

There are important ways in which Adichie's prose works, *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah*, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and her *Dear Ijeawele*, foreground her vision for black women's empowerment. As a contemporary feminist writer, Adichie brings into relief some of the aspects that distil into black women's place and presence in identity politics. Among such aspects are women's desire for onomastic autonomy, linguistic versatility and academic freedom, severing the patriarchal stranglehold and the liberty to define their beauty on their own terms. Through an inflection of these aspects, Adichie constructs and articulates her notion of feminism 'closer to a circumspection global feminism had yet to emancipate into' (Rafapa 2017:285). In this way, Adichie considers drawing black women's voices from the periphery to the centre as inimical to the polyvocal discourse on blackness and womanhood in the postcolonial world.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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