

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: I Became Black in America

Adichie speaks on the meaning of blackness, sexism in Nigeria, and whether the current feminist movement leaves out black women.



Adichie in 2017 via [Flickr/Howard County Library System \(https://flic.kr/p/UuVKz2\)](https://flic.kr/p/UuVKz2).

By: [Hope Reese \(https://daily.jstor.org/daily-author/hope-reese/\)](https://daily.jstor.org/daily-author/hope-reese/) | August 29, 2018  15 minutes

“Some people ask: ‘Why the word feminist? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?’ Because that would be dishonest,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote in We Should All Be Feminists (the book based on her 2012 TED Talk). “It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women.”

Adiche, the internationally celebrated novelist, moved to the U.S. from Nigeria, and some of her most powerful writing--in her 2013 novel Americanah, for instance--explores what it means to be African, and what it means to be African American, with extraordinary depth. Yet in her latest work, Dear Ijeawele: A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions (2017), Adichie posits that sexism can be an even more destructive force than racism.

Her words have not only earned her many literary honors, including the National Book Critics Award, the Orange prize, and a MacArthur fellowship, they also have resonated with many powerful figures, from Oprah to Beyoncé to Hillary Clinton.

I spoke to Adichie on the phone and asked her what sexism looks like in Nigeria, whether the current feminist movement leaves out black women, and other topics. Here is our conversation, edited for length and clarity.

Hope Reese: There's a scene in your book *We Should All Be Feminists* where you are giving a talk in Nigeria and someone says that feminism is "un-African." What does feminism mean in Nigeria?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: People say that because they want to find a way to discredit feminism. And also because Western feminism is the most documented, the most known-about, so it's seen as, essentially, the only feminism.

I didn't become a feminist because I read anything Western or African. I became a feminist because **I was born in Nigeria and I observed the world** . And it was clear to me, very early on, that women and men were not treated the same way; that women were treated unfairly, just because they were women.

So I always felt this way. I don't remember a time when I wasn't passionate about this feeling of injustice. I started to talk about it publicly with my book called *We Should All Be Feminists*--which was actually initially given as a talk at a TEDx event that was

focused on Africa. My audience was actually African. The people who said you can't talk about feminism because it's Western, and I think, for them, feminism is what they read about. Feminism is Gloria Steinem, or feminism is the British stuff.



But for me, feminism is my great-grandmother, who was a feminist. She may never have used that word--obviously, that word doesn't exist in Igbo--but she was because she pushed back against all of these sort of cultural ideas that held her back because she was a woman.

My great-grandmother was called a troublemaker, which I love. But, anyways, so now today in Nigeria there are many feminists. I mean, in Nigeria, as all countries of the world, you only have to look at the history of a country or the people and inevitably, you will learn about when they can push back. There's nowhere in the world where there's gender equality. But I think that everywhere in the world there's been women who have pushed back, right? They're always in the minority, obviously, but they're there and they're feminists. But today in Nigeria, young women are self-identifying as feminists and some young men as well, I have to say. The conversation is being had.

For women who already were questioning these things--that marriage is the ultimate thing for you as a woman, marriage defines you, that you don't get full respect until you're somehow attached to a man or that you're not supposed to have too much

ambition because you're going to intimidate men--suddenly there's a language for it: feminism.

“I wasn't black until I came to America. I became black in America.”

They still encounter a lot of pushback, and much of that pushback is couched in the language of culture. People will say, “Well Africa doesn't support feminism because African culture says that the man is superior.” What I find interesting is that actually, it's global culture that says the man is superior. It's everywhere in the world. Culture is never static. The places where women were considered property some years ago, now, women are not considered property. So, things change.

If you had been addressing a group of women, say, in Saudi Arabia--where women were recently granted the right to drive, but still have very few rights--would you say some of the same things to them? How can you help women where it might be dangerous for them to actually speak up and fight for themselves?

I think that there is a small and very quiet Saudi feminism. Actually, Qatar is different in many ways. I remember speaking to women in Qatar, and they had the same sort of views that I had in many ways, right? A woman said to me--she's young, she's married-- “I was reading everything in your book. If only I had read it before I got married. Things would have been different for me because I was thinking them but I didn't know how to say them.”

I found that very moving, right? This idea that she didn't think she should have got married that young. There were other things she wanted to do with her life before getting married. If I had to talk to women in Saudi Arabia, I think it's a very good idea to celebrate every little step. Change is always incremental.

You live in a society that is so divided by gender. Public transportation is divided by gender. There are so many opportunities you don't have because you're a woman. But, I think it has to be incremental. We can't expect Saudi women to go from zero to one hundred. They have to go from zero to one, then two, then three.

I, for example, thought that the whole not allowing women to drive was just really dumb. Even if you want to oppress women, what you're also doing is you're oppressing the opportunities of your country, right? You're holding back half your population. You don't want the talent they have. You don't know what they could contribute. You're just holding them back for a reason that makes no sense.

I'm kind of a believer in making the economic argument. I don't think women are better; I think women are human. But making the economic argument, which is to say if you deprive half your population of access, it also means that you're depriving your nation of possible talent, it means that your economy is not doing as well as it could. In general, I think that men in power like economic arguments. So, if I speak to women in Saudi Arabia, I think that's the tactic I would adopt.

In your novel, *Americanah*, your heroine is African, and you illustrate her experience of coming to America and what she learned about blackness in America. I'm curious to hear about your experience of coming to America. What have you learned about how Americans see blackness in America? Or the difference between being African American and being African?

First of all, I wasn't black until I came to America. I became black in America.

Growing up in Nigeria, I didn't think about race because I didn't need to think about race. Nigeria is a country with many problems and many identity divisions, but those identity divisions are mainly religion and ethnicity.

So my identity growing up was Christian, Catholic, and Igbo. And sometimes I felt Nigerian in sort of a healthy way, especially when Nigeria was playing in the World Cup. Then I would think about my nationality as a Nigerian. But, when I came to the U.S., it just changed. I think that America, and obviously because of its history, it's the one country where, in some ways, identity is forced on you, because you have to check a box. You have to be something. And, I came here and very quickly realized to Americans I was just black. And for a little while, I resisted it, because it didn't take me very long when I came here to realize how many negative stereotypes were attached to blackness.

For me, the story that I hold onto as my defining moment of realizing what blackness meant was when I was in college and I had written this essay and it was the best essay in the class, so the professor wanted to know who had written it. I raised my hand and he looked surprised when he found out that it was me.

I remember realizing then that, "Oh, so this is what it means." This professor doesn't expect the best essay in class to be written by a black person. And I had come from a country where black achievement is absolutely normal. It wasn't remarkable to me the idea that black people are academically superior because, you know, everybody in Nigeria was black. So the people who were bright were black. So I resisted it. I didn't want to be black. I would say to people, "I'm not black, I'm Nigerian." Or, another identity that America gives me was African, so that in college people just wanted me to explain Africa. I knew nothing about anywhere else, apart from Nigeria, really.

"I decided that having understood African-American history, I was a part of it. African-American history doesn't actually start on the slave ship. It starts in Africa."

Looking back, especially my first year in the U.S., my insistence on being Nigerian, or even African, was in many ways my way of avoiding blackness. It's also my acknowledgement of American racism--which is to say that if blackness were benign, I

would not have been running away from it. And so it took a decision on my part to learn more. I started, on my own, reading African-American history. Because I wanted to understand. It was reading about post-slavery and post-reconstruction, Jim Crow, that really opened my eyes and made me understand what was going on, and what it meant.

And it also made me start claiming this blackness. I went full-circle and started identifying as black. I think it was a political decision; I decided that having understood African-American history, I was a part of it. African-American history doesn't actually start on the slave ship. It starts in Africa. So in a way, we're related. But America will label you black anyway--so the things that black people experience, I experience. I remember, for example, going to the store years ago. And it was a bit of a fancy store that sold expensive dresses, and I just wanted to go and look around. I remember very acutely--you know when somebody wants to make it clear to you that you're not welcome, but they never actually say you're not welcome? It was so obvious to me. I just remember being a little shaken by it. I think I hadn't experienced anything of that sort.

Nigeria has many divisions but it's really hard to tell who is who just by looking at people--so that kind of immediate and overt discrimination just can't happen. If I walk into a store in Nigeria you can't tell if I'm Igbo or Yoruba. Now as a public figure, I'm still struck by how, in the airport--and this happens very often--I'm jumping in line, and I'm going to the First Class line, invariably somebody will say to me, "Oh, that's not where you're supposed to be, ma'am, this way." And it's just an automatic assumption. And I realize it's because I'm black--you're not supposed to be there because you're black.

The point is that I started out not identifying as black, now I do very happily, and also partly because I take a lot of pride. I deeply, deeply admire African-American history. I think it's just all full of resilience and I think it is under-celebrated in the U.S., and I find that quite sad.

I think the stories of slavery are important, but also I think the stories of just... grit .
I look at these pictures and there's this little girl that wants to go to school and she's surrounded by a bunch of adults and they're screaming at her. I just think it must take something deeply noble to somehow keep going when you live in a society that dehumanizes you, really.

You didn't grow up in America, so you likely have an advantage. Being taught that society values you less must take high toll on confidence, right? I'm curious about how people like that young African American girl can overcome that.

Yes, I think it's important to acknowledge that to be a black immigrant is different. To be a black immigrant from a black majority country is to come with a certain level of confidence. Just growing up seeing black achievement as normal. And to be African-American is to have had a very different experience. There are people who have said to me, "Oh, you're not angry. You're different." And I find that deeply offensive because it's Americans that say this, white Americans. And the reason I find it offensive is that by saying that, what they're really doing is that they're denying American history. If they think that African Americans are angry, there's a reason for that. It's just constantly being put down and absorbing all of these things in the media and culture. We've seen all of these studies about teachers who say to the black kids, "Oh, you can't aspire to this thing; you can only do so much."

So I think that there's a privilege to growing up black in a country that isn't based on race. I also do think that America can do better and do more about racism. Actually maybe the first step is acknowledgement. I'm always struck--the minute an African American talks about experiences, I'm struck by how many people are very quick to find ways to discredit it. As though somehow African Americans like racism. I mean, nobody wants racism to exist.

You know, an African American will talk about racism and people will say, "Oh, no, no, no, that can't be." But why else would somebody say that it's racism? It's not like we enjoy it. I want it to end.

“The language with which we talk about racism in America hasn’t changed in 80 years.”

I think, also, that we live in a culture where people don’t actually listen to one another and people don’t actually hear one another. And this is even before. I think America is terribly divided today. But even before this administration, people just didn’t really listen to one another. And I also think that people who are not black in America feel threatened, and feel that to talk about this is somehow to indict them and to make them responsible or guilty--and I don’t think that’s the case. I mean, white Americans didn’t choose to be born white, they just happened to be. I think what’s important is what one does with white privilege, right?

So here’s an example: I think that white men have to be front and center in the fight against racism. They have the power, so they have to be the ones to say, “We need a more diverse workforce. We need to start very early. We need to have kindergartens in African American neighborhoods that are actually very good.” Because that’s where it starts.

You bring up the current racial climate--we’ve now seen, in Charlottesville, for instance, some terrifying racism that has been bubbling under the surface. How did you feel when that happened? And where do we go from here?

It’s not really that surprising. When did the majority of African Americans get their voting rights? In the 60s. But that doesn’t mean that automatically everything was fine because there’s still many, many communities in which people found ways to keep them away from voting. I would also argue that there are still many of those things going on today with all of these ways of trying to suppress the vote of African Americans and Latino people to a certain extent. So I wasn’t really surprised, sadly. I felt really sad, and I just felt deeply wounded that that young woman was killed, but knowing these people existed in America didn’t really surprise me. I think it’s taught.

The reason that maybe some people were surprised is, I think, the language of racism and race. The language with which we talk about racism in America hasn't changed in 80 years.

(Penguin Random House)

But racism has changed in the way it manifests itself. I think we sort of assume that racists are the KKK in the white hood at night, but really the racist is the guy in accounting. Right? It's really people who are normal and ordinary, and what Charlottesville did was it made it obvious. These people who are having these torches at night, in the morning they get dressed up and go to perfectly respectable jobs.

Maybe the first thing we need to do is change the language and understand that racism isn't just that somebody called you the "N"-word. That racism often is subtle and that we really, really should listen to African Americans. I just feel that that's part of the thing, that it's important to listen to them. It's going to take a very long time to acknowledge and address the subtle, less obvious forms of racism, given that it's taken so long for us to think of saying the "N"-word, which is a relatively overt form of racial aggression, as a crime

American police unfairly target and even kill African Americans, especially young black men. How do you see this issue? What kind of solutions do you think could begin to address this problem, which seems so pervasive in our country?

I want to sort of read up on this, on the recruitment process to the police force in the U.S. I don't know quite how it works, but it seems to me that something needs to change. I think reaching out to communities that historically have distrusted the police is important. And recruiting from those communities is important. Also, I haven't had many encounters with the American police, but in the very few that I've had, I'm struck by how sort of almost non-human, almost mechanical they are, and not terribly friendly. The police, they're supposed to be your protectors, they're supposed to be human. That might be the first start.

I remember when something happened in our neighborhood here in Maryland and the police went from house to house asking questions. When they came to our house I said, "Oh, what happened? Did something happen?" And this police person says to me, "Ma'am, just answer my question." I just thought, my God. Right? I mean, here's an opportunity to endear yourself to hearts and minds, and you have not taken it.

My nephew is a 24-year-old black man in Connecticut who drives a Mercedes that he worked for. I'm constantly nervous. I'm constantly checking up on him. I'm constantly saying to him, "If you're ever stopped, just don't do anything. Don't even talk back. Just do exactly as they say." Because I'm terrified for him.

“I don’t feel that western feminism is my own story. When people talk about the first wave, the second wave, I feel no personal connection to it.”

The other thing that we’re not really talking about is guns. I think the police are afraid. Right? I think they wouldn’t be so afraid if America wasn’t a country that was utterly awash in guns. I was reading something a few days ago about a black man they had shot because they thought he had a gun. I remember thinking, but this is also a country that says you can have guns. So, then is it a question of who’s allowed to have a gun and who’s not?

I think that guns have to be part of the conversation of policing, because otherwise I don’t think the police would be as terrified as they are, and therefore more likely to just murder people.

So, some black women in America, like Roxane Gay, have been critical of what they see as a mainstream feminism that leaves black women out. How do you feel about feminism in America? Is it a white thing?

I think it was a white thing for many years. I think, in the history of American feminism is one of racism as well. Because there were many white women who were feminists who didn’t want to include black women. Who didn’t want to acknowledge that black women had certain specific experiences that were different. Especially in regards to things like work. Right? Feminism meant, “we need to go out and work,” for white women. But black women had been required to work—in fact, we’re overworked. So I understand why African American women often feel excluded from American feminism. I think it’s changing a bit. But I also think that the answer is to widen the number of voices on the stage, so to speak. That we have different kinds of women who can talk about the differences in their experiences.

It's changing, but I don't feel that western feminism is my own story. When people talk about the first wave, the second wave, I feel no personal connection to it--that's not my story. Mine is quite different. So, as an observer, I think that it's certainly changed a bit from its racist past, but I think there's a lot more that could be done. But what's even more important is to hear more people's voices and more people's stories.

Sometimes on the left, feminism has become a thing that you have to be very careful about because you don't know who you're going to offend. I remember reading a review of this white woman's book about her life and she was criticized because it was all about white feminism. I remember thinking, "Yeah, that's what she knows. She's a white feminist." Right? I don't want her writing about Latino feminism. She's not Latino, right? But I remember thinking that it's kind of sad that that had become a legitimate way of criticizing, sort of, a memoir. Because now I think there's a certain type of feminism that dictates that if you're a white straight women you cannot tell your story unless you account for the women in Bangladesh or something. I find that disingenuous, I really do.

I think that the answer is to have the women from Bangladesh tell that story. And for that story to matter to all of us. You know?

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