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Sociology of Gender

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Analytical Book Review

In the novel, *We Should All Be Feminist*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, utilizes anecdotal storytelling to support her feminist theory that all members of society should function as feminists and proudly proclaim this title. Adichie's experiences demonstrate the complexities of accepting and identifying feminism when it is counterintuitive to social practices. Adichie proposes that society can bring an end to harmful stereotypes that further perpetuate people to be complicit to the injustices of misogyny and gender politics by changing standards. She largely attributes the way to create change is by reforming child upbringing. In Nigerian culture, a large part of gender expectations is firmly rooted in the household and upbringing. Adichie proposes a solution that encourages others to stray away from sexist language and encourage professional and personal values to succeed. Undoubtedly, Adichie's work and explanation for her feminist theory parallel to the sentiments and concepts introduced in the chapter readings of, *Gendered Lives: Intersectional Perspectives*. Adichie's position on passive conditioning and resolution conflict with the "Declaration of Sentiments" by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Additionally, Adichie's understanding of the complexities of gender denotes tones and overviews that are similar to ones developed in "A Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective. Adichie's personal experience and acceptance of feminism are similar to Mathangi Subramanian's, "The Brown Girl's Guide to Labels". Also, the work of Patricia Hill Collins in, 'Excerpt From "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of

Empowerment” is useful because it poses an explanation for the approach and perspective Adichie used when formulating her theory. Lastly, in “Does Gender Matter? Notes Toward Gender Liberation,” Loan Tran demonstrates an expansive intersectional approach to gender and identity that differs from Adichie’s work.

To begin, Adichie’s position on the passive experience of misogyny and theorized solution to the complexities of feminism conflicts with Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s “Declaration of Sentiments”. As a preface, the ideas behind their messages are the same; however, their explanations are different. For example, in the novel, to demonstrate passive sexism, Adichie shares the experience she had in the classroom setting as a child to portray her early encounters with gender-based discrimination. In this anecdote, her childhood teacher presented the classroom with the highly-anticipated job of classroom monitor. The teacher imposed an exam to determine the person that she would choose for the classroom job. Although Adichie scored the highest on the exam, the teacher did not choose her for the job because the position was only for male students. She explained she was upset because the teacher and her classmates expected Adichie to get over it, and this was her norm. Conversely, the work of Stanton directly addresses the issues with passive gender-discrimination. Stanton attributes passive sexism to the expectation of women to adhere to a moral code that differs from men. She suggests that women are conditioned to become dependent on men by the societal standards that have permitted men to destroy women in the relationships of confidence, power, and self-respect. The two positions differ, by Adichie’s reliance on anecdote and expectation for the audience to conclude that this is an example of passive feminism and only waiting until the end of the novel to suggest ways to resolve this complex, whereas Stanton’s words are direct and promote a thorough understanding of the way sexism is morally-woven into society. This feature of Stanton’s argument is most

similar to Adichie's position on creating change for the future success of feminism. Adichie asserts that change is possible by altering the upbringing of children. She suggests that raising children away from gender norms and expectations, similar to those mentioned by Stanton, can stunt growth in the realm of feminism. She affirms Stanton's words by suggesting that girls experience encouragement to cater to the egos of men. Stanton explains that change happens by the curation of women and the aid provided by people in power. She prefaces this by saying women should be able to occupy space, and if a law ignores this liberation, it must be modified. Again, Stanton is more direct in her approach to the concepts of sexism and creating change, and Adichie takes a more personal approach. Adichie's approach could be better substantiated if she added Stanton's direct approach to her theory.

Next, Adichie's understanding of the complexities of gender is similar to tones and overviews developed in "A Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective. The work of Adichie and the Combahee River Collective presents a broader view of matters relating to gender. For instance, in "A Black Feminist Statement," the Combahee River Collective addressed issues about the intersecting identities of Black women. They used their meetings to discuss the ways the American political system has disadvantaged Black women by the methods of "racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression" (Combahee River Collective 28). Although Adichie's experience with race is different, it does not take away from the broader view of oppression that she emphasizes in her writing. In her novel, Adichie informs the audience that Black women in Nigeria experience several forms of oppression; occupational, sexual, and class oppression are a few of many methods. Adichie refers to the political and social system that undeniably works against Black women when she told the story of being stopped by a security guard when she entered a hotel unaccompanied. She felt uncomfortable and thought

presenting her keycard to her room would not stop the interrogation. She explains that she was a target because of the assumption that “a Nigerian female walking into a hotel alone is a sex worker” (Adichie 19). Moreover, the Combahee River Collective declare Black feminism as a movement that is personal and often calls Black women to refer to their experiences to explain the reinforcements of gender stereotype. The Combahee River Collective explained, “Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism” (Combahee River Collective 29). The aforementioned is a similar method Adichie uses to demonstrate her encounters and struggles with feminism and identifying herself as a feminist. In both texts, the author either refers to or utilizes storytelling to make present instances of discrimination and further expand on the difficulties that Black women experience.

Likewise, the approach and perspective Adichie used when formulating her theory can be explained by the work of Patricia Hill Collins in, ‘Excerpt From “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment”’. In this reading, Collins focuses on Black feminist thought to address the concessions of theorizing in adherence to the dominant culture. Often, this does not include the perspective of Black women. Collins identified a transition of Black women relying on personal experience, instead of relaying information inherence with the dominant standard, in efforts to clarify their positions on feminism from an approach that is situated in their identity. In the text, Collins references situated knowledge, subjugated knowledge, and partial perspectives which are approaches that are utilized in the Black feminists’ approach. Collins admits that it does not “discover absolute truth,” but it can destabilize the dominant group which is a major step in the right direction (Collins 74). Adichie’s work takes an approach from each group of situated knowledge, subjugated knowledge, and

partial perspective. She uses personal experience to present grounds that formulated her theory that all people should be feminists. Although this insight, is extremely helpful, because it sheds insight into a perspective that is neglected by society's dominant culture, one must acknowledge that it does not have a complete value which, "allows it to discover the absolute truth" of feminism (Collins 74). Collins perfectly captures the minor issue with Adichie's work when she said, "Existing power inequalities among groups must be addressed before an alternative epistemology....can be utilized" (Collins 74). Adichie's work is a great stepping stone to unlocking larger issues with feminism and formulating methodologies to resolve them, but it is missing more perspective.

Also, Adichie's personal experience with accepting feminism is similar to Mathangi Subramanian's journey in, "The Brown Girl's Guide to Labels". In "The Brown Girl's Guide to labels," the author notes that throughout her life she refused to identify herself as a feminist. She associated the term feminist with wild women that burned bras and grew out armpit hair with a vengeance. She also interpreted it as a movement of reclaiming the word sexy. This aspect made Subramanian feel as though the movement was not made for women like her—brown women, because only white women are in a capacity to reclaim sexiness since they are the standard of beauty and sex appeal. As Subramanian entered adulthood, she discovered the true meaning of feminism once she was introduced to inclusive feminist text. In a reading, she discovered the term, "third world feminist" (Subramanian 37). To be a third-world feminist is to "[acknowledge] that women did most of the world's work, and were therefore fighting for the right to rest" (Subramanian 37). The phrase, third world feminist, taught Subramanian that feminism does not have to be narrow and only cater to benefit white women (Subramanian 37). This feminist perspective accepted her for her identity, and she claimed it proudly. Similarly,

Adichie initially rejected the label, feminist when her childhood friend told her, “You know, you’re a feminist” (Adichie 8). At the time, she did not know what the word meant but was able to draw a negative connotation by the tone used by her friend. When she entered into adulthood and began to streamline feminist writing and articles, many people disapproved and called her an unhappy feminist. Utilizing the tactic of sarcasm, Adichie used the label, “Happy Feminist” to identify herself (Adichie 9). She continued to receive pushback from her community as she refined the label of her feminist identity to align with personal experiences and systems of beliefs. Adichie’s journey is similar to Subramanian's because she was able to reject stereotypes that are associated with feminism and manage to reclaim a variation of the title that would recognize the other traits of her identity.

Finally, Loan Tran’s “Does Gender Matter? Notes Toward Gender Liberation,” validates a broadly intersectional approach to gender and identity that Adichie’s work does not directly confront. For example, Tran emphasizes the notion that gender liberation is also an issue for transgender, gender non-conforming, poor, migrant, and third-world women and people. Although feminist groups have a record for not including these groups, the groups can still benefit from the advocacy of women’s rights. Tran clarifies this by connecting the differences of lived experience between transgender and cisgender women and stressing that they share the broader experience of patriarchal oppression. In their writing, Tran is formulating their feminist theory with the considerations of other groups in mind and relating their issues to the problems that Trans also experiences in their group of gender non-conforming people. This method is effective because it forces the audience to be respectful of differences and recognizes the greater value of similarities that are experienced across groups. Adichie’s text is different from Tran’s because she stays within her perspective of being a Black Nigerian woman and does not make an

attempt to go further and broaden her advocacy. Adichie's novel could greatly benefit by acknowledging Black transwomen in Nigeria or any other group of people that can benefit from her proposal. This tactic could spread the outreach of her message.

Overall, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminist*, proposes an excellent theory that everyone should be feminist and proudly claim the role. The book referenced themes and utilized methods of reasoning that complimented the readings utilized in, *Gendered Lives: Intersectional Perspectives*. Adichie's book relates to the "Declaration of Sentiments" by Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Adichie's understandings are similar to those presented in "A Black Feminist Statement" by the Combahee River Collective. Adichie's journey to acceptance of feminism is similar to Mathangi Subramanian's, "The Brown Girl's Guide to Labels". The work of Patricia Hill Collins in, 'Excerpt From "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment"' is useful because it explains Adichie's theory. Lastly, in "Does Gender Matter? Notes Toward Gender Liberation," Loan Tran demonstrates an intersectional approach that differs from Adichie's work.

Works Cited

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