



# **Black Feminism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Buchi Emecheta's *Joys Of Motherhood***

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## Abstract

Black feminism is an offshoot of mainstream feminist movement to create an alternative construction of a space that is free from political, cultural and imperial hegemony. It lays emphasis on primary factors beyond "gender" that affects the lives of Black women; race and class oppression are as much relevant as sexism in this context. According to Black feminist writers and scholars, race, class and gender are the three major interlocking factors that determine the struggles faced by Black women in the postcolonial era irrespective of geographical boundaries. This paper aims to explore the underpinnings of Black feminist ideology in Adichie's novel *Americanah* and Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. It also focuses to study the specific socio-cultural, economic and political conditions that tend to shape the identities of the female protagonists in the two novels. Furthermore, the paper also explores how far the Black feminist ideology of the two authors helps to unearth the ground realities of the lives of Black women living in African continent and in diaspora.

**Keywords:** Black feminist ideology, postcolonial era, gender, race, class

## Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie born in Nigeria in the year 1977 is an established contemporary fiction writer who focuses on highlighting the issues of race, colour, class and feminism through her writings. Her novels translates the problems of gender expectations, stereotypical notions of femininity, post-colonial identity-crisis, and the effects of the confluence of gender, race and class to the readers. There is also a seepage of Adichie's own consciousness in her works as a result of her lived experiences in United States; she voices her concerns as how Black people are stereotyped as rudimentary in knowledge, in science, innovation and lifestyle in common parlance. Adichie's novels are acclaimed worldwide and due to their massive appeal they have been translated in more than fifty-five languages.

On the other hand, Buchi Emecheta (1944-2017) was a prolific writer who wrote more than twenty books of fiction and non-fiction, most of which were concerning women issues. Emecheta called herself as “I am an African feminist with a small f” (qtd. in Umeh 31). Emecheta’s novels raise consciousness towards the suffering of Black women in “both African and European environment” (35). In order to understand the feminist ideology that underlies *Joys of Motherhood*, it is noteworthy to bear in mind some important biographical details about Emecheta’s life. Emecheta was married merely at the age of 16 years, and she migrated to London along with her husband and two children in the year 1962. Emecheta gave birth to three more children in London by the year 1965, and suffered physical, mental and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband; finally the two separated when Emecheta was merely twenty-two years old. Emecheta started writing novels and much of her writings, “focussed on the politics of race, gender and sex which [were] based largely on personal experiences” (South African).

## Black Feminism

Black feminism is an ideology that has its origin in the struggles of Black women living in United States prior to the abolition of slavery. Numerous Black women joined the anti-slavery movement, and Harriet Beecher Stowe was the first women abolitionist whose novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was a landmark moment to raise anti-slavery sentiments among its readers. Many white women also supported the anti-slavery movement, but in reality practiced the segregationist policy towards Black females such as refusing to integrate Black girls alongside white girls in the classroom (Davis 51). The early leaders of the women’s rights movement which were mostly white failed to understand the systematic relationship between, “the enslavement of Black people in the South, the economic exploitation of Northern workers and the social oppression of women” (57). Many white women in women’s rights movement were unwilling to support Black men’s suffrage prior to white women as it could elevate the Black men’s status equal to that of white women, and hence they opposed the passage of fourteen and fifteen amendment to the U.S constitution. This underlying racist ideology within the feminist movement was opposed by Black women activists such as Sojourner Truth from the initial days of feminist movement in the United States. Gradually when white feminist organisations consistently failed to include and address the issues of Black women, it led to discontentment among the later resulting in split of the parent organisation and outgrowth of Black women’s club movement under the leadership of Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell. Historically, Black women felt more solidarity towards Black men rather than white women because Black men despite of getting enfranchisement suffered racist violence, segregation and economic depravity owing to their colonial history and prior slave status. Black feminism focuses on destruction of socio-economic and political systems of racism, capitalism and imperialism.

Black feminism gained prominence during the second wave of feminism in the late 1960’s when elitism and racism within the mainstream movement marginalised Black women and their concerns; and thus in 1973 Black feminists formed a separate group called the National Black Feminist Organisation (Combahee 328). Initially, Black feminism focussed on anti-racist and anti-sexist fronts but gradually the ideology encompasses heterosexist and anti-capitalist agendas. The development of the concept of intersectional feminism by Black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw supplemented the concept of identity politics. The concept and theory of intersectionality helps to understand the working of multiple forms of oppressions in an overlapping or compounding manner that in turn results from different aspects of an individual’s identity to create a unique system of oppression. Black feminists claim that their struggle is on-going due to negative reaction from Black men who consider that by collaborating with white women on anti-sexist stance; Black women have loosened their alliance with Black men and have lost focus on the anti-racist politics. In order to resolve such problems that “are rooted in competitive either/or thinking” Bell Hooks in *Feminist Theory* (2015) suggests to shun absolutism or dualistic thinking by “deflecting attention away from stereotypes” (31). Hooks suggests that by way of adopting proper linguistic choices such as “I advocate feminism” rather than “I am a feminist”, Black women can make a choice to commit to feminism

while supporting other political movements such as racism (31). In a nutshell, Black feminism requires a “comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture” (The Combahee) alongside gender to address major concerns of the lives of Black women.

### Black feminist ideology in *Americanah*

A close study of *Americanah* reveals its propensities towards Black feminist ideology, for instance, throughout the text Adichie seeks to destabilise the liberal feminist assumption that all women face similar forms of oppression as the first world women. The novel largely focuses on the life of a Black woman named Ifemelu who migrates to United States to study and search for a job. Apart from Ifemelu there are other female characters some explored some just touched upon by the author, yet each viewed from the lens of a culturally, socially, historically, economically and politically conscious Black feminist theory. Through the character of Ifemelu, the reader is made cognizant of the socio-cultural norms that thwart the day to day existence of African American women or non-American Black women living in United States. Ifemelu experiences cultural differences in almost all walks of life—from body perspective including body shapes, clothing and hair to language and accent peculiarities. For instance, when Ifemelu was with her American boyfriend and his friends she was at times struck “by the irredeemable Americanness” (Adichie 207) of their linguistic choices.

The text pinpoints that an important aspect of Black women’s identity is their hair—the cultural expectation in United States from Black women is to not wear their hair in their natural texture, but to straighten and relax their hair with damaging toxic relaxers in order to conform to the white ideals of beauty and professionalism; which resultantly leads to disconnection, confusion and even identity fragmentation among Black women. When Ifemelu gets an interview call her Black female friend advises her to lose her braids and straighten her hair if she wanted to be taken seriously (202). Again, Adichie emphasises how Black women who wear their hair naturally are stereotyped as suitable for non-serious jobs. Ifemelu remarks, “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 means straight is best but if it has to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst spiral curls but never kinky” (204). This statement problematizes the negative perception of Black women largely due to a biological physical trait i.e. the natural kinkiness of their hair which is related to their race. Such stereotyping of Black women who chooses to wear kinky hair as unprofessional or outgoing, reduces their self-esteem. Again, on further evaluation of the statement it is evident that if Black women choose to keep curly hair they must follow the norm set by white beauty standards or else their body will be devalued and rejected by the mainstream culture and society in the west.

One of the important tenets of Black feminism is to highlight the everyday life and difficulties faced by Black women in socio-cultural and political context; and Adichie makes it a point to intersperse the text with relevant everyday life happenings from a Black feminist perspective. The aesthetic value or dark skin tone of non-white women specifically are undervalued in mainstream media and western culture, and there are instances in novel where white women regard a white man’s romantic relationship with a Black woman as a brief flippant stint. Ifemelu has a very porous personality and she is receptive to even the most subtle and ultra-fine slighting. Thus the issue of insincere praise of a Black woman’s beauty by a white person so as to compensate the mainstream racist ideology and make the person offering praise appear as a supporter of anti-racist sentiments is termed as vague by Adichie through her mouthpiece Ifemelu, who snorts at Kimberley when she praises every Black women as beautiful. On another occasion when Curt’s mother praises Ifemelu’s eyelashes she calls it a deliberate praise not a genuine one. Similarly, Adichie takes up the issue of Black people imitating American accent to sound as natives of United States and explores its psychological implication upon the minds of Black folks. For instance, Ifemelu remarks how “faking an American accent.... It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue” and eventually Ifemelu realises that “the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will” (Adichie 173). Over a period of time “the mannered, overcareful pronunciations” in order to fake the American accent aroused inside her a

feeling of pettiness about her roots, ethnicity and race; which could be termed as internalised racism which is a phenomenon wherein a person belonging to non-white race considers himself or herself below the white race.

One of the cornerstones of Black feminism is its focus on intersectionality and the unique experiences of Black women in domestic life, interpersonal relationships, family and at work. This paper examines how intersection of race, class and gender creates different perceptions of identity between Black and white women. The incident where a Black carpet cleaner is intrigued and shocked to find Ifemelu, a Black woman who opens the gate of a huge mansion “and she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with the white pillars” (166). The narrator comments that “race is class.... in America’s public discourse” wherein the Blacks are categorised as poor (166). Similarly, Adichie highlights the insecurity and mental conflict of a Black woman who is in a love relationship with a white man in United States through the example of Ifemelu. Ifemelu and her white boyfriend Curt were completely at ease and in love with each other when alone in their apartment, but Ifemelu felt a constant gaze, a feeling of being scrutinised in public spaces as to whether or not she is suitable to be in a relationship with a handsome rich white man. Yet again, Adichie very effectively pinpoints the issue of social marginalisation of Black women through an apt real life situation; the seclusion of Black women and their needs by high-end and good quality salons in developed areas due to which the Black female protagonist half-heartedly travels to a segregated ghetto which provides hair braiding services for kinky hair in an unkempt and filthy surrounding. Adichie thus highlights how racist and classist attitudes of white community marginalise Black women to avail services that are below standard and unhygienic; irrespective of their economic class all Blacks are thought to be from a low social class. Through these incidents and narrative commentary Adichie highlights the lived experience of racism, sexism, class disparity and marginalisation of Black women at crucial moments in the novel.

#### Black Feminist ideology in *Joys of Motherhood*

The novel *Joys of Motherhood* is a feminist social commentary on the traditional Igbo society and on political and social imperialism in Nigeria in the pre-independence era. Emecheta is critical of the oppressive and degrading culture and tradition towards Nigerian women. Through the narrative the author highlights how societal pressure destroys the life and happiness of the female protagonist Nnu Ego. Emecheta also brings to notice the personal, social and economic degradation of the female protagonist Nnu Ego as a result of British colonization and imperialism. First and foremost, the reader is made aware of the unjust marriage laws of the traditional Igbo society where women are treated as commodities and the inheritance of women is passed on from fathers to husbands. Emecheta reveals how a young and beautiful girl Nnu Ego is married to a man Nnaife who was no match for her. Nnu Ego’s has no say in choosing her husband; it is solely the prerogative of her father. Later on, after her marriage Nnu Ego finds her husband repulsive and unappealing with a “protruding belly” (Emecheta 43); she is compelled to live with him because she impregnates her while she could not bear children in her first marriage to Amatokwu. As the novel progresses, Nnu Ego’s twin daughters Taiwo and Kehinde grow up and are decided to be married off in lieu of a good bride price by their father Nnaife. The narrative pinpoints the materialistic and insensitive mental disposition of a father towards his daughters; when a suitor comes to ask the hand of one of the twins, “Nnaife quickly approved of this man, knowing that his daughter was striking a good bargain, and he was in a hurry to get as much money as possible from his children before retiring” (203). As a reader, we come across numerous changes taking place in the traditional Igbo society due to British colonisation which the author pinpoints such as men in Ibuza shaved their head closely, but in Lagos Nnaife hair imitated the white men’s demeanour which made Nnu Ego comment that “His hair, unlike that of men at home in Ibuza, was not closely shaved; he left a lot of it on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband” (42). Nnaife and other men like him who have left the villages and are working for white men starts practicing Christian religion superficially to please their masters. But with respect to women and their predicament, the

traditional norms did not change and readers are made aware of how women remain victims of patriarchy generation after generation.

Emecheta's perspective on motherhood, employment for women and child-care corroborates the Black feminist perspective. Hooks pinpoints that for Black women, "labour outside the home was most often seen as stressful, degrading, and dehumanising" since they were prone to racism and lacked skill and education to bargain in their interests (133). The same sentiments and mental predilection is exhibited in Nnu Ego's behaviour; it is not desire for freedom or financial independence that drove Nnu Ego to work but rather scarcity of food, malnourished children and need for shelter acting as catalyst, forcing her outside the home. The narrative in *Joys of Motherhood* bears testimony to the fact that due to unfavourable socio-cultural, economic and political conditions of Black women in Africa and in diaspora they experience adverse circumstances when they move out of their homes to find employment. And hence, unlike a homogenised experience popularised by mainstream white feminists there exists differentiated opinions on "motherhood and work outside the home" among Black women who from "slavery to the present day... have worked outside the home, in the fields, in the factories, in the laundries, in the homes of others" as pointed out by Bell Hooks in Black feminist theory (133).

Yet most importantly, the novel exposes how women are treated as reproductive machines in a traditional Igbo society. The biological and psychological experience of pregnancy and childbirth has been very vividly captured by Emecheta through poignant imagery and symbols. It is the female who bears the child and gives birth, but with the exception of her first child Nnu Ego is not consulted by Nnaife whether she is ready for the responsibility of more children. Men granted some status to women who could bear male children to keep their lineage going and thus when Nnu Ego gave birth to her second set of twin daughters it "had a subduing effect" on her (Emecheta 186). Nnu Ego gave birth to nine children out of which seven survived and merely at the age of forty "she felt like the oldest drone imaginable" (194). This statement pinpoints endless atrocities faced by the traditional Igbo women whom society epitomises as life-giver and care-giver, and thereby burden solely with the responsibility of parenting and raising children. It is obvious that Nnu Ego had all the qualities of a good entrepreneurship, but her consecutive pregnancies kept her inundated in poverty. Without any post-natal care, nutritious food and sharing of responsibilities in bringing up children by her husband, she ages prematurely, becomes sick, loses her sanity and dies an untimely death. Thus, the text can be considered as a Black feminist manifesto that deals with domestic, social and economic troubles arising when women are burdened with the sole responsibility of raising children; it also exposes the unviable context in which motherhood is deemed in society at large calling to question the unviable joys of motherhood.

## Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* elucidates the life of an African woman immigrant subjected to the process of behavioural conformity and cultural transformation, while Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* portrays the sufferings and distress of a Nigerian woman living in her own country undergoing a transition in her life due to shift from a traditional community into a capitalist urban locality. One common finding that came to light in both the novels is that Black people are not conscious of their race until they come in contact with white culture which disparate their colour, culture and race, and thus making them constantly and painfully aware of their low stature in the imperialist hierarchical distribution of power. The textual analysis of the two novels unearths the importance of gender, race and class as determinants of power relationships both in the home country and diaspora. Black feminism not only brings to light the personal and political consciousness of Black women, but it offers algorithms to examine the interrelatedness that exists between gender, race and class—a relationship that puts Black women at the very bottom of socio-economic and political ladder.

The paper also outlines the importance of acknowledging heterogeneity in feminist agenda. Adichie in *Americanah* demonstrates through the lived experiences of Ifemelu, how gender, class and race are inextricably linked; and how discriminatory practices against Black women put them at the bottom of social ladder. However, we also notice that though the external forces are responsible for shaping identity, yet the author designates self-affirmation inexorably as one of the most factors in identity formation. In a nutshell, Ifemelu in *Americanah* is an embodiment of textual resistance to break the stereotypical presentation of Black women in theory and praxis; and offers an alternative actualisation of Black women which is self-conscious and self-affirmative. On the other hand, through the portrayal of Nnu Ego's life, Emecheta highlights the socio-cultural and political struggles of Black women during colonial period. Firstly, Nnu Ego is exposed to an imperialist capitalist economy which exploited Black women more than Black men as the later had access to at least standard wages, but Nnu Ego throughout her life keeps on struggling in an unstable informal job of street-side hawking. Secondly, Nnu Ego's desire to become a mother is a belief implanted in her mind by tradition Igbo culture and society that only a woman with many sons is a full woman; it degenerates her life, as she loses her youth, health and vitality alternating between giving birth to children and working incessantly to feed them. Lastly, as a result of a shift from her tribal community to the new economic and political setting of Lagos, she suffers degradation in her social stature by losing the cultural privileges and benefits that could have accrued to her in the tribal system. To concede, both the novels are different in terms of setting and treatment of feminist issues, but share common grounds in fostering the cause of Black women's liberation; wherein Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* very poignantly pinpoints the difficulties of Nnu Ego's life thereby creates social awareness, while her successor Adichie moves one step ahead and also explores the psychological and mental difficulties of the female protagonist in *Americanah* which eventually gets resolved through self-reconciliation and affirmation evoking a sense of Black feminist consciousness in the minds of readers.

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