

An Exploration on the Effective Feminist Rhetoric in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “We Should All Be Feminists” Speech

To what extent does Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie use rhetorical techniques and emotive language in her “We Should All Be Feminists” speech to reframe what it means to be a feminist?

May 2022

Literature Category 3

Candidate: Kayla Cardenas

Word Count: 3854

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	2
II.	Tales of a Young Feminist.....	3
III.	Laughter in Numbers.....	7
IV.	A Society Divided.....	10
V.	Conclusion.....	13
VI.	Works Cited.....	14

INTRODUCTION

Evolution's creation of man and woman, though different in nature, could not survive nor procreate without one another. In the age of the Paleolithic, the societal roles of men and women were not separate but in fact varied, based on circumstance and occurrence. Yet, somewhere along the rhythm of history, a tune which had been so overplayed to the point of exhaustion reigned true, with its lingering hum still present in the minds of many today—despite numerous changes of tempo. Men walked the Earth unrestrained in their position of divine supremacy, with women as the holy subordinate. In recent centuries, with feminism as the face of the aforementioned changes, it has historically succeeded for deserving breaths of equality to be inspired by different groups of women globally. However, much like the sixteenth century corsets which women wore—the patriarchal world hasn't allowed yet for a full breath of air.

Despite the momentous achievements made by feminists, interpretations of feminism among the world's ever-changing populations and societies haven't always been representative of what feminism truly strives for—especially now in modern day. Some have argued that adequate societal changes have been made and met, therefore evading the need for any forms of feminist activism. However, conversations upon social issues held by the movement of feminism pursue topics which are often avoided and rarely addressed, while also being neglected under the western lens. Though general awareness for the continued need of feminism has improved in recent years, there is much work to be done, and feminists like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are at the forefront of this effort. In Adichie's TEDx Talk, her speech gives rise to the question: To what extent does Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie use rhetorical techniques and emotive language in her "We Should All Be Feminists" speech to reframe what it means to be a feminist? In this speech, Adichie transforms the view of feminism in the eyes of her audience while encouraging

them to become feminists through engaging anecdotes, humor, and societal dissections filled with pathos to draw support from men and women alike. In spite of the fact that Adichie's speech is nearing a decade of age, the topics in which she tackles and her commendable use of transformative speaking elements remain relevant today in showing the ways in which stereotypes limit the idea of feminism.

For the sake of encapsulating the topic of feminism as a whole, research was conducted on credible articles which cover feminism in modern-day along with the beginnings of the feminist movement, thus lending credibility and context to Adichie's words. Additionally, in order to uncover Adichie's own personal sources of motivation behind her speech, biographies, images, as well as Adichie's other speeches and books were read and analyzed. Adichie's older Ted Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" is a key testament to the visions behind her equal rights activism and her speech on feminism, through delving into the topic of a social phenomenon that can be applied to a broader context. The remnants of today's sexist social dynamics which are especially overlooked in developing countries, are put into question through Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" speech. She speaks of many topics within the movement of feminism in the context of her own experience growing up in eastern Nigeria, which can be applied to a vast spectrum of experiences globally. Perhaps the most crucial yet neglected detail present when approaching problems which feminism aims to solve, is the ways in which such problems apply across the lives belonging to both the female and male sex; and how at the root of every true feminist effort, is hope for a better life for all.

TALES OF A YOUNG FEMINIST

Every feminist has a reason or story of origin which bloomed their passion in advocacy regarding gender inequality, and for Adichie, that reason was as natural and part of her as her

DNA. As a child, Adichie's good friend Okoloma was her partner in discussion on topics they'd gained knowledge in, both being very inquisitive children. Adichie begins by telling her audience about a time in her youth when they were going about their routinely debate, and after their arguing Okoloma commented, "You know, you're a feminist" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). To her surprise, the word in question, "feminist" was not a term which she was familiar with at the time. Yet by the disapproving tone in which it was said, it could not have been of good definition. The implied nature of the word opens the discussion of Adichie's speech, concerning the negative associations and stereotypes in which feminism can be regarded with by mainstream society. Nevertheless, this simple anecdote framing the speech's objective exemplifies Adichie's feminist characteristics which she possesses most naturally. Her insightful experience embarks her journey into heeding the changes which require action through advocacy. Since the time of her childhood, being "feminist" was looked down upon, with the word's baggage carrying on to even the minds of the society's children, as revealed by Okoloma's tone. From that point onward, Adichie made it her mission to reframe the implications in which the feminist movement holds in the perspective of dissenters. This necessity to spark change in the way feminists and feminism is viewed stems from the undeniable need to cease the voicing of female opinion in society from being deemed an inherent threat to it. Therefore, Adichie uses these anecdotes to begin illustrating how the advocacy of women's rights have been tainted by the effects of misjudgment, thus her purpose in redefining feminism is demonstrated to the audience by such reasoning.

After her opening story, Adichie continues her narrative with another anecdote following the publication of her novel as an adult. A Nigerian journalist approached her without ill-intention, to advise her that her novel was unfortunately being referred to as feminist, and

“because feminists are women who are unhappy because they cannot find husbands” (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”), this should be of concern to her. Even in her adulthood, there is no escaping from the negative baggage and stereotypes surrounding an outsider perspective to feminism. Many of Adichie’s audience members understood the fallacy in the statement which the man had made, chuckling in response, with an underlying hint of having heard similar assumptions before. However, the extent to which seemingly evident stereotypes can be widely identified is not always so far reaching, thus their continued existence is simultaneously acknowledged. Adichie supports this by including a follow up in the final statements of her speech to the story taking place during her childhood where she was first called a feminist. She explains that on that day after her conversation with Okoloma, she searched a dictionary for the definition of a feminist, which the definition she agreed with read, “Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes” (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”). Yet despite the rational and just definition behind feminist ideology, feminism was still looked down upon going forward in many instances of Adichie’s life. In result, this conclusion to Adichie’s opening story fully captures the gravity of the gender issue which she addresses thoroughly to her audience. The concept that women and those opposed to accepting rigid societal expectations as is, discrimination on the basis of gender, and social disparities are an issue, is the issue. The thoughtful implementation of her personal experiences across her lifetime involving scrutinization for being a feminist, opens her unfortunate accounts to garnering a further motive towards her cause among the audience. If a respected writer such as herself could withstand assumptions made of her, then there is truly a wholesome purpose behind the feminist cause which Adichie continuously pursues. Thus, Adichie incentivizes her audience to consider referring to themselves as feminists too.

To contextualize, The history behind the negative stereotypes held about feminism which Adichie addresses is complex. *Gender Issues and Sexuality: Essential Primary Sources*, a book covering important social issues of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, in a section titled “Introduction to Women's Rights Movement,” editors K. Lee Lerner et al. discuss feminism on the topic of the struggle for women's rights. According to K. Lee Lerner et al., “the women's movement strives for social acceptance of a variety [of] personal and professional choices that women make” (65). The challenge of constrictive social norms incasing women, which the book defines feminism as fighting against, leaves feminism open to criticism from those adamant in upholding those strict conventions. Hence, experiences similar to when Adichie encountered the man who assumed that a woman challenging societal standards is simply unhappy for not having a husband, can be frequent occurrences. In truth, what a woman does with her life is by her own choice, and not merely a reflection of a standard being broken. Additionally, more criticism against inherently feminist matters can be observed in the same book, under the section titled “Our Changing Sense of Self,” which describes the media response to a women's health book, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The book was “passionately pro-abortion, pro-sex education, and pro-birth control and openly discusses and illustrates terms such as clitoris, menstruation, hymen, menopause, and orgasm” (80), which led to its banning in multiple school libraries including ridicule. Jerry Falwell, a fundamentalist Baptist minister, “denounced it as ‘obscene trash’ during an interview with the Seattle Times in May 2005” (80). Despite some topics which the book discusses being inevitably subject to moral question, the opposition which this book received is exemplary in showing the deep-rooted prejudice against women which society holds, as at the book's core, it was made for the sole purpose of providing women with accurate bodily health information. This prejudice proves the points which Adichie makes on the existence and

implications of feminist stereotypes—justified further by her anecdotes which incentivize her cause in rewriting them. Adichie demonstrates an understanding that her pursuit of inspiring an audience to become feminists is not simple conversion; it requires a mainstream reframing of the concept itself.

LAUGHTER IN NUMBERS

Laughter is an action and expression that can form a connection between people, something Adichie evokes through her jokes to do just that with her audience, all in order to further convey the message of feminism. Adichie tells a childhood story about the time her teacher held a test in which the best scoring student would receive the title of class monitor. To her content, she had scored the highest on the test. However, her teacher surprisingly announced after the fact “that the monitor had to be a boy … because she assumed it was … obvious” (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”). In spite of this unfortunate turn of events told to the audience, Adichie brings light to this awkward sharing in bringing them to laughter with the “obvious” remark. In adding a gag toward the end of her story, the audience is invited to partake outwardly in examining the speech, inducing a sense of intimacy with the speaker, Adichie. Not only this, but the encounter with speaker and audience allows for the implanted notion that a girl cannot be a leader to be greatly evaluated. Following this account, she humors the audience once more, retelling an experience from her adulthood she had while on an evening out in Lagos with a close friend named Louis. They arrive at an establishment and hand over the car to a courteous man working for a valet parking service. She illustrates her decision to give the man a tip with her own hard-earned money, to which the man responded with by looking over at Louis and saying, “Thank you, sir!” (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”). Adichie imitates the man in an overly enthusiastic Nigerian accent, making the audience burst into laughter at the impression.

As before, the stories told were thoughtfully included to not only humor her audience, but to appeal towards her ethos while expressing a real-life injustice based on gender. The pair was stunned to have witnessed the man's ignorant actions, but unlike Louis, Adichie knew undeniably that the man had done so because Louis was man, and she was not. Captivating her audience using humor in the context of the demeaning moments she has experienced not only makes Adichie's stories an easier pill to swallow, but aids Adichie's pathos. Thus, the audience inclined to hear her claims, and guided towards the many ways in which feminist activism is necessary to advocate against similar misjudgments of women.

In continuation of her goals, Adichie demonstrates further success in persuading her audience in favor of feminism through using humor which takes jabs at social norms. Later when discussing how girls are praised for their virginity—and boys are not—she pokes that “it’s always made me wonder how exactly this is supposed to work out” making the audience burst into laughter, followed by an applause (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”). In playfully pointing out the two-sided nature in the act of losing virginity that society seems to ignore, Adichie exemplifies comfortability with her audience through making a joke which risked vulgarity. This risky humor proved effective, with most of the crowd showing praise; thus, the intended meaning behind her joke was more likely to bear weight on viewers. In addition, attention-grabbing humor proves useful when Adichie then goes onto address another inconsistency in social norms on the subject of housework and more specifically, cooking. Adichie contemplates towards the audience, “Today women in general are more likely to do the housework than men … is it because women are born with a cooking gene?” (Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists”). The audience chuckles over Adichie’s satirical speculation, and she soon follows up with another remark, “maybe women are born with a cooking gene, until I

remember that the majority of the famous cooks in the world ... are men" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). Humor is used yet again as an effective tool for securing her audience's attention, making a point out of her joke to emphasize yet another discrepancy with the norms of society. With the audience kept in a constant state of reminder of the context that is feminism, Adichie's humor juxtaposed by real-life issues on gender can connect harmoniously in persuading audience members to consider feminism as a just course of action to counteract these societal problems.

Moreover, humor is an invaluable device that can be used in an array of techniques both intentionally and unintentionally, that not only shows details on a matter in a laughable light but can bring individuals who share a laugh, closer. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a book which explores the philosophy of humor, in a section titled "Humor [Addendum]," section author John Morreall discusses the ethics of humor and its general implications on people. To investigate this topic, Morreall derives his observations from other sources and credits them in the statement, "One strong position, called *moralism* by Berys Gaut, says that appreciating a joke involves subscribing to the beliefs and attitudes it expresses" (par. 6). Adichie deliberately incorporates humor into the evidence and anecdotes which support her advocacy for feminism, to draw out the audience's emotions in support for her overall argument. Not only this, but if her onlookers are to convey amusement towards her jokes, then in turn they've conjured positive sentiments towards the presenter, Adichie. To sustain this idea, in the book *Thank You for Arguing* by Jay Heinrichs, the author justifies that "humor ranks above all the other emotions in persuasiveness, in part because it works the best at improving your ethos" (90). Therefore, with ethos being an appeal concerning character, Adichie's jokes progressively establish a line of credibility and charisma for herself as a speaker. The relationship of the audience towards Adichie is

consequentially uplifted, empowering Adichie to successfully relate her commentary on gender stratification and stereotypes back to her spectators as evident problems, which by following the true purpose of feminism, they can help solve.

A SOCIETY DIVIDED

Indeed, among the most pressing issues in today's society is the lack of equity and empathy between the male and female sex, which Adichie highlights to fully engage the interests and emotions of her audience. Near the opening of Adichie's speech, she highlights a statistically astonishing piece of information: "There's slightly more women than men in the world, about 52 percent of the world's population is female. But most of the positions of power and prestige are occupied by men" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). This percentage speaks volumes of the disparity between opportunities offered to women not only in the workforce, but in civilization as whole. It is a statistic which, while damaging to the women of society, limits society itself from prospects which can only be achieved through inclusion, representation, and range. In emphasizing this fact, Adichie's overall argument being presented to her audience is opened to an array of near existential analyses, questioning why people must endure living in such an inequitable world. As her analysis lies within topics which feminism aims to solve, Adichie lends the feminist movement further credibility. Though this statistic handles a broader truth, soon after Adichie is quick to address specific instances where the social disparity rooted in sexism is exhibited in everyday life. Adichie begins explaining, "Each time I walk into a Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores me" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). Although it is a personal example, voices in the audience interrupt Adichie's following statement with an outburst of laughter that echoes the repression of stress caused by learning of the unfortunate situation. The viewers are enlightened to envision how a similar issue

could happen to any other woman, to see the importance of feminism globally and in their own lives. Thus, simple audience interjections that affirm the relatable nature between Adichie's experience and perhaps their own, profoundly shows how the principles of equity within feminism—and across all human interaction—are longed to be upheld.

In the middle of her speech, Adichie delves into the ways in which the world's patriarchal structure negatively affects men, while also subsequently affecting women. Highlighting the manner in which mainstream society views masculinity, she underlines, "We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). Though paradoxical, men suffer from a society centered around them due to the consistent expectation to show independence, assertiveness, and strength to no end—otherwise known as manliness. The circumstances of the male experience often leave men without healthy coping mechanisms for their feelings and pent-up trauma, an injustice which the developing feminist movement strives to address. Adichie demonstrates her awareness to reach all kinds of people in her audience: men and women. Later, Adichie follows up with the ways in which male masculinity inversely affects women: "If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, you have to pretend that you're not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). Teaching women to dim their own light and downplay their accomplishments is not only inequitable on the basis of gender, but unfair to the individual respective of the progress it took them. Thus, Adichie draws upon these deep-rooted societal dispositions to spark a dialogue with the audience regarding what can be done to reframe the inner workings of their lives. Recognizing fragile masculinity as an issue which concerns men and women aids the process in encouraging the entirety of her audience to become proactive feminists. Adichie demonstrates a keen eye in pointing out the realities which

inconvenience and frustrate individuals subconsciously, which eventually complicate their lives. Adichie fosters her goal in actualizing an audience of inspired feminists by addressing ingrained societal issues that obstruct the lives of everyone; therefore, the audience can envision that such issues can only begin to change by taking purposeful steps of correction.

All in all, feminism and gender equity are not two wholly different causes, instead they intersect and draw from each other—they're planted in the same soil and grow from the same seed. Regardless of identifying as male, female, or otherwise, the feminist movement is a cause which diligently attempts to address the struggles specific to everyone. In terms of men, according to *The Gale Encyclopedia of Mental Health*, in a section titled "Gender Issues in Mental Health," authors Friedrich et al. write, "Research indicates that men who strictly adhere to extreme gender roles are at higher risk for mental disorders" (681). The section goes on to specify how such men may suffer in their intimate relationships, mentioning "they may avoid emotional expressiveness or may behave in domineering and hostile ways" (682). In Adichie's speech, she addresses the downsides of male masculinity to validate to male audience members that their struggle is recognized within feminism. Therefore, Adichie conveys that the feminist pursuit towards gender equality indeed involves the liberation of men from toxic and destructive expressions of their masculinity. To that end, Adichie focuses the remainder of her speech on how the patriarchal world harms women and robs them of free will. In the book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* by Kate Manne, a philosopher whose work focuses primarily on feminist, moral, and social philosophy, she writes, "Misogyny hence functions to enforce and police women's subordination and to uphold male dominance" (19). With misogyny's function in mind, Adichie's speech is a catalyst for further exposing society's negligence in acknowledging women as multi-faceted beings. Misogyny controls and reworks even how women view themselves and

treat other women in turn, eventually evolving itself into an internalized form. In that pursuit, Adichie demonstrates an attention to inclusivity, upholding in final that aligning oneself with feminism is an act to remedy and protest the struggles of all people while lending itself to empathy for one other.

CONCLUSION

Today, significant sums of women grow up in a world where they are afforded opportunities and rights that their grandmothers perhaps weren't. Yet at the same time, there is a world of women still suffering on the complete other side of the spectrum. Practicing feminism especially in modern society is an honest act, that in succession, extends a voice to those women who have yet to be heard. In "We Should All Be Feminists," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cunningly demonstrates the value in being a feminist through significant anecdotes, emotive techniques from humor, and vividly displaying pathos from feminism's pertinence on men and women. Her arguments defeat the status quo and live up to the very name of her speech, affirming in final that, "The best feminist I know is my brother Kene. He's also ... very masculine" (Adichie "We Should All Be Feminists"). The experiences which Adichie draws upon though personal, serve the purpose of conveying stories which too many women have encountered in their own way. Adding humor to her speech lightens the ambience from the serious subject matter while gravitating the audience towards the intricate points being made. Adichie persistently reveals how the double-sided rhetoric society upholds against women also restricts men to adhere to roles which confine human choice, affirming that there is no shame in being a feminist. In the speech's entirety, Adichie expresses that speaking out unapologetically against the pervasive maltreatment of women and all surrounding issues is precisely what being a feminist is all about—uplifting the movement towards gender equality.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "We Should All Be Feminists." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, December 2013,
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda Ngozi adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*, July 2009,
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda Ngozi adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

Friedrich, Sandra L., et al. "Gender Issues in Mental Health." The Gale Encyclopedia of Mental Health, edited by Kristin Key, 3rd ed., vol. 1, Gale, 2012, pp. 676-683. Gale eBooks,
link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX4013200206/GVRL?u=fl_ap&sid=GVRL&xid=b3533ed3. Accessed 14 Feb. 2021.

Heinrichs, Jay. *Thank You for Arguing*. 3rd ed., Crown Publishing Group, 2017.

"Introduction to Women's Rights Movement." Gender Issues and Sexuality: Essential Primary Sources, edited by K. Lee Lerner, et al., Gale, 2006, p. 65. Gale eBooks,
https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587400038/GVRL?u=fl_ap&sid=GVRL&xid=7be4dc5
 5. Accessed 29 Nov. 2020.

Manne, Kate. *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*. Oxford University Press, 2019.

Morreall, John. "Humor [Addendum]." Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Donald M. Borchert, 2nd ed., vol. 4, Macmillan Reference USA, 2006, pp. 518-519. Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints,

link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3446800885/OVIC?u=fl_ap&sid=OVIC&xid=98fef7c3.

Accessed 15 Jan. 2021.

"Our Changing Sense of Self." *Gender Issues and Sexuality: Essential Primary Sources*, edited

by K. Lee Lerner, et al., Gale, 2006, pp. 78-82. Gale eBooks,

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2587400044/GVRL?u=fl_ap&sid=GVRL&xid=0bc78bc

d. Accessed 29 Nov. 2020.