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The Other Chimamanda Adichie Beyond the Feminist Icon

By October 2016, Nigerian-born novelist and public speaker Adichie had become so famous that CNN titled a story about her with the question: »Is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie the most influential woman in Africa right now?«¹ The journalist, Phoebe Parke, focuses on Adichie's public endorsement of a British pharmacy company's line of make-up products together with her status as an icon of feminism. In her public appearances and in her writings, Adichie has advanced a concept of feminism that includes a celebration of female beauty along with a gender-egalitarian approach to the social roles of women and men.² In which sense, then, could Adichie be »most influential«? CNN seems not quite sure. The author's photograph in the CNN article is captioned with the words, »feminist, author, and a real influencer«.

The three terms in collocation describe the reality and the complications of authorship in today's media-driven world. The generic designation »author«, which could mean anything from putting one's name on a ghostwritten tell-all memoir to producing challenging and lasting literary texts, is in danger of getting lost between the politically meaningful »feminist« and the commercially appealing »real influencer«. I believe that negotiating the two sides of publicity that I will preliminarily call ›serious‹ and ›popular‹ is both an undeniable fact and a complex challenge for the author herself.³ At first glance, one sees nothing amiss in a successful writer's associating herself with cosmetics. If liter-

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- 1 <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/19/africa/chimamanda-adichie-influence-africa/index.html> (6.7.2020).
 - 2 Asked about the endorsement, Adichie responded: »One of the things that I think is important is that we shouldn't moralize makeup« (Cheryl Wischhover: Talking to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Beauty Brand Ambassador We All Need Right Now. In: Conversations with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Ed. Daria Tunca. Jackson (Mississippi) 2020, p. 152–156, hier p. 155).
 - 3 By ›serious‹ I refer to the literary ambition and aesthetic quality of Adichie's writing, explored in greater detail below. ›Popular‹, by contrast, refers to her commercial success. The two need not be opposed, but they should properly be seen as two sides of a coin which, as well, cannot exist on one side either.

ary fame and commercial success go together, why not? And yet, in reading novels and stories that thematize Nigerian history and draw heavily on Adichie's biography (as, for example, in *Americanah*), readers inevitably judge the quality of the serious writing along with, or under the impression of, the popular fame of the author. In style, substance, and subject matter, Adichie's literary prose aims high and succeeds. In her evocation of Nigerian history and sociology, Adichie is, above all, serious, even if she often focalizes her narratives through young couples in and out of love, a topic that less serious writers explore in a less accomplished manner. She is the very antithesis of a »chick-lit« writer. At the same time, she displays a public persona of privilege and even luxury. A more complete awareness of this complex dichotomy may help us to better understand Adichie's literary achievement.⁴

But can a white male European-born academic approaching his retirement years – a fair description of myself – speak adequately and meaningfully about a black female Nigerian-American literary superstar who is adulated by young women around the world? Is it appropriate that I take up pages of print to add my voice to a loud and happy chorus of accolades, or will my writing be seen as an act of appropriation instead? In a particularly charged moment of race relations in the United States in the summer of 2020, when fossilized structures of systemic racism begin to break up and symbols of the Confederacy tumble from their pedestals, when suppressed voices finally receive the hearing they have so long been denied, how do I balance respect and critique in plying my trade, that of literary criticism? Am I forever bound up in my own identity, in part chosen and in part imposed? In the quarter-century I spent in the United States, my »racial« identity was designated by others, not by myself. Assuming for the moment that

4 The 2010 *Concise Companion to Postcolonial Literature*, ed. Shirley Chew and David Richards, published by Blackwell, does not mention Adichie either in connection with Nigeria or with feminism. Given the notable prizes that Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* had obtained by that time, this omission is a surprise. The *Companion's* insightful chapter on »Feminism and Womanism«, by Nana Wilson-Tagoe, outlines differences between Anglo-American and African forms of women's literary empowerment, but Adichie's posture will sweep these differences away. In terms of literary relevance, it should have been impossible to overlook Adichie after the 2006 publication of *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

»race« exists as a definable category – it is a social reality in the United States – do my race and gender implicate me beyond my choices?

I believe that honest and relevant literary analysis can be performed respectfully. My gender and culture do not limit me any more than the writers I study are limited by theirs. Our common object is humanity, and each of us brings a particular history and a particular self to the table. In this essay, I want to examine both the tensions and the opportunities created by the wide range of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's publications in traditional literary genres like the short story and the novel on the one hand, and online talks and programmatic texts on the other hand. As I read Adichie's work in the context of my academic discipline, American Literature, I find myself recapitulating fundamental *topoi* of American literary history. Both Adichie's literary writing and public speaking are present-day exemplifications of the social role of writers who successfully straddle the seeming divide between fiction and non-fiction: a divide made permeable through the instrument of autobiography. Life-writing is a hallowed American form of literary expression, and the »I« authorized by Henry David Thoreau is the robust American vehicle of self-description and self-analysis.⁵ Yet in an age of hypertrophied identity consciousness, the literary critic is challenged to offer a self-positioning as well. And that's a good thing.

Questions of ethical positioning are not new for Germans of my age. With our formative high school years occurring in the seventies, we had to learn early that our self-positioning vis-à-vis Germany's Third Reich history and the Holocaust would mark our ethical standing. We would be able to lead responsible lives only by rejecting both collective guilt and collective innocence at the same time. In their place, we would need to embrace personal responsibility in all our doing while recognizing the historical weight that the Holocaust had placed on us; recognizing, too, that Germany's history would require us to tip the

5 On the opening page of his 1854 *Walden*, H. D. Thoreau observes, with mock modesty, »In most books the I, or first person, is omitted; in this, it will be retained. [...] I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body [sic] else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience«. Thoreau's *captatio benevolentiae* here licensed the use of the »I« for American literature thereafter (Henry David Thoreau: *Walden*. Oxford 1997, p. 5).

scale always in favor of protecting persecuted minorities, whether Jewish or other.

Elaborate self-positioning at the start of an essay must not be self-indulgent. Its purpose is to describe the ground on which the writer stands. My asking these questions and sketching out answers shows how far the educational agenda of the post-WW-II decades has succeeded. Long gone, thankfully, are the times in which literary critics of my gender and ethnicity wrote as if their perspective was universal, as if a universal perspective could exist at all. Our echo chamber now is potentially unlimited, since every reader may now have access to tools of communication and commentary. Every statement can generate a response. Our speaking ›about‹ others has changed, or should have changed by now, to speaking ›with‹ others. No pronouncement can be ›ir-responsible‹ any longer.

Chimamanda Adichie's echo chamber, her audience, is the world. Her 2003 debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, may have received largely polite attention at the time of its publication,⁶ but ever since the publication of her 2009 short collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie has been a writer to watch. Her TED talks, in particular the much-quoted »The Danger of a Single Story«, have become popular teaching tools. In every venue, Adichie consistently makes use of multiple examples or a series of anecdotes to establish her point. True to her program, she does not rely on a single story but instead offers vignettes from which a composite message can be drawn. Her two large novels to date employ the same technique of distributing the story across characters in literary terms: *Half of a Yellow Sun* is told through the perspectives of three focalizers (two Nigerians and one English journalist) and concerns the coming-of-age of one Nigerian as well as the emotional entanglements of two couples. *Americanah* is told through the different experiences of expatriate Nigerians in the United States and Britain. The novels teach their readers about African history, war, racism in the United States, and the love stories of its mostly Nigerian protagonists. Adichie's commitment to feminism meanwhile is especially foregrounded in nonfiction texts, among them her long essay *We Should All Be Feminists* (2012) and her more recent *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017). The nexus between social activism and sophisticated

6 Shortly after publication, however, in 2005, *Purple Hibiscus* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize both for Best First Book (Africa) and for Best First Book (overall).

literature deserves to be examined a bit more closely. My scholarly vantage point probably qualifies me more for a literary analysis than for an appreciation of Adichie's feminism; however, I embrace without hesitation her definition of feminism: »A feminist is a man or a woman who says, ›Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it.«⁷

American⁸ literature, such as I teach it, is always a committed form of writing. Since America constantly reinvents itself, American literature has of necessity been an instrumental kind of literature. The preponderance of »useful« texts in the American canon – sermons, jeremiads, handbooks, letters, political pamphlets, captivity tales, argumentative essays and speeches – testifies to Americans' need for orientation and narratives of experience. The greatest American novels thematize national moral outrage in the guise of personal moral quandaries; this is true as much of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Doing literary criticism today in recognition of how American literature came to be asks us always to be conscious of the specific biases and contingencies foregrounded by a text.

Today, again, though in a different form than in earlier ages, the implicit nexus of identity and ethics is a fundamental American problem. In American slave narratives and other autobiographies, that nexus is often explicitly acknowledged in the very titles of literary works themselves, from the 1789 *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* to Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. The story is linked to a name in each case, the word »life« in the titles vouches for veracity, the categorical terms »African« and »Slave« telescope the individual fate to a larger group. Twentieth-century texts in the same autobiographical tradition, giving voice to previously silenced minorities, follow suit, from James Baldwin's 1955 *Notes of a Native Son* to Mary McCarthy's 1967 *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. Here, the author is not part of the title, but the group affiliation is explicit and the choice of »Notes« and »Memories« enhances the appeal of authenticity.

7 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: We should all be feminists. TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists?language=en#t-1734553, min. 28:29–28:54; 6.7.2020).

8 In accordance with current academic usage, I use ›American‹ as an adjective for the United States of America. It is not intended as a hemispheric designation.

In postcolonial studies, the term ›authenticity‹ has had a checkered history.⁹ Along with ›exotic‹ and ›subaltern‹, which are clearly unacceptable, it has been rejected as an inappropriate imposition of standards of genuineness on the postcolonial subject. In this understanding, the label ›authenticity‹ would simply replicate colonialism, as the colonizer is still the subject who bestows the label. But frankly, there is no reason to limit »authentic« to this very particular understanding. In a 2008 article, Adichie herself appeared to disagree with the notion of African ›authenticity‹ but, as one reads more deeply, she really objects to the use of stereotypes, not to the idea of lived authenticity.¹⁰

Authenticity as a philosophical concept, when applied to persons, refers to their distinctiveness. It is the quality of persons who are recognizably motivated by what is particular to them and not to others. Persons become authentic precisely by not being labelled, determined, influenced or by copying others. They are genuinely themselves. I believe that postcolonial studies should reconsider using ›authentic‹ in its originally positive valuation.¹¹ In this more generous sense, slave narratives are authentic in terms of the subject's experiences, but they structurally point to the fates of others in a comparable situation. Postcolonial writers, however, have taken authenticity to an entirely new level.

Unlike the writers of slave narratives, contemporary writers often eschew explicit positioning in terms of group affiliation. Either they invest their literary texts with their own, partially fictionalized identities, so that readers confront characters that amalgamate biographical truth and fictional truth, story and argument, realism and social advocacy, psychological complexity and political statement, in one and the same narrative. Or they choose the form of direct social address that bypasses literariness in favor of non-fiction. Nineteenth-century slave narratives give us the story of one slave so that we may care about slavery as a problem for those remaining in bondage. Today's stories of

9 For a rich discussion of the problematic and for further documentation, see Mari Korpela: *A Postcolonial Imagination? Westerners Searching for Authenticity in India*. In: *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 36 (2010), No. 8, pp. 1299–1315, DOI: 10.1080/13691831003687725.

10 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *African ›Authenticity‹ and the Biafran Experience*. In: *Transition* 99 (2008), pp. 42–53.

11 Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon: »Authenticity«. In: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition). Ed. by Edward N. Zalta (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/authenticity/>; 6.7.2020).

identity generally choose the path of making us interested in caring about the person, the writer, who stands behind the story and who invests it with credibility. Readers, in turn, are called upon to bring more than a polite interest and a critical mind to their reading: they are expected to invest their own biography, social situation, and desires for societal development into the act of reading, so that reading becomes one activity in a chain with other activities, leading readers perhaps to challenge and reconsider their assumptions, or to take part in social protest and advocacy. The increasing popularity of postcolonial writing enables such reflection and activism beyond the act of reading itself. Frederick Douglass's reader was impelled to fight slavery politically or through his religious congregation. Contemporary novels make their appeal more individually, as they repeatedly issue calls to personal transformation. In this, they address the command passed down by Rilke's »Archaic Torso« to a singular »you«: »Du musst Dein Leben ändern!«¹²

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short book: *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), illustrates perfectly the fluid borders between fiction and social activism for a contemporary writer. Speaking in her own voice, addressing friends and family members by name, and referencing her own recent motherhood, Adichie employs her literary fame as a perch from which to dispense opinions on parenting, as she tells how a childhood friend asked her advice on »how to raise her baby girl a feminist.«¹³ Adichie has garnered enormous respect around the world as a writer, but it is as a public speaker on feminism that she has found a truly global public. The uneasy tension in the title between the programmatic »manifesto« and the modest »suggestions« highlights the writer's predicament: on the one hand, a political movement requires a manifesto, but on the other hand a young family requires suggestions. The personal touch and the naming of specific names transport warmth and empathy, while the African names of the protagonists are unusual enough for Euro-American audiences to either let themselves be involved or to unconsciously »exoticize« the characters. Feminism is a world-wide concern, and it may well

12 Rainer Maria Rilke: Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe in vier Bänden. Vol. 1: Gedichte 1895–1910. Ed. Manfred Engel and Ulrich Fülleborn. Frankfurt a.M. 1996, p. 513.

13 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. Fourth Estate 2017, p. 3.

take other forms in Africa than it does in Europe. The feminist advice proffered in the text itself is safely middle-of-the-road and middle-class appropriate: Adichie stresses the joint and equal responsibility of both parents, points out the normative character of language and the need to resist it, and advocates for notions of sexual self-possession and identitarian choices reflecting a broad liberal spectrum. Heterosexuality is tacitly assumed to be normative though »difference is normal«, tolerance is good, and being »non-judgemental« must not deteriorate into bland acceptance.¹⁴ These suggestions presuppose a fundamental emotional and financial stability for the family in which the future feminist is to be raised. There is no question that Adichie herself is just as much a »brilliant, strong, kind woman« as the childhood friend she describes as the original instigator of her *Fifteen Suggestions* on the book's opening page.¹⁵ When I met Adichie for an all-too-short lunchtime conversation in November of 2019, I was profoundly taken with her personal aura, her superb intellectual alertness in spite of jetlag, and her ability to focus the attentions of those around her. It is impossible to doubt Adichie's honesty and good intention. In her TED talk on feminism, referenced above, as she humorously closes in on her subject, she tells anecdotes that criticize institutional gender bias, but it is all done in a gentle tone that lends credence to her self-declared posture of being a »happy African feminist«.¹⁶

But does being a good writer make one qualified to write about childhood education? Is parenting advice the right vehicle for a serious novelist? Perhaps it is: the writer as public educator – what in an earlier age might have been called a »moralist« – is familiar in such different figures as Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and Oscar Wilde, four authors who embedded their social teaching into their fiction. An earlier generation of Nigerian writers including Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka clearly saw themselves as writers who were political activists as well. Still, how does Adichie's fame across the internet, a new form of public visibility, translate into our reading of her fiction?

In her role as fiction writer, at the other end of the literary spectrum, Adichie in 2006 published *Half of a Yellow Sun*, her most consequential novel so far, a courageous and searing work about the Biafran War of Independence (1967–1970). Telling history through literature, she cre-

14 Ibid., p. 60 and p. 61.

15 Ibid., p. 3.

16 Adichie: We should all be feminists, min. 2:48.

ated two young couples as focalizers of the narrative. As a way to teach history through the people who suffered it, this novel is superbly realized. Its strength lies in the very fact that Adichie (born in 1977) is not writing from direct personal experience, but from deep historical research leavened by experiences undergone by members of her parents' generation. In courageously taking on the suppressed story of the horrors of the Biafra conflict, Adichie has confronted a national trauma of extraordinary violence and pain. I have read the novel three times and I have wept three times after concluding it: only *King Lear* and selected poems can move me similarly. The sheer humanity of the protagonists and the sheer anguish of war combine to create a story of enormous affect told with excruciating humanity. All four protagonists have social ambitions; three of them are academics who debate socialism, independence, decolonization, sexual liberation, and cultural appropriation. The fourth, Kainene, is a smart businesswoman who rejects her father's way of doing business through patronage. The characters share dreams and ambitions that any young adult may have, and they must try to realize them under the most dangerous of conditions, a war pitting Biafra against Nigeria. The manipulation of chronological time in the novel into four longer blocks of narrated time is the artful literary tool that allows Adichie to bring out the experiences that define a time of war: before and after, hope and loss, estrangement and reconciliation.¹⁷ Truth is revealed through perspective. Anything in the novel that hostile critics might qualify as being »preachy« or overtly ideological is instead integrated into the characters' lives, lending them complexity and authenticity.

Similarly, Adichie's short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, is the perfect instantiation of her warning against the danger of a single story. If one reads these stories with a knowledge of the two large novels to come, one sees quickly that each individual story is

17 For analyses of Adichie's two large novels that are particularly attentive to their narratological features, consult Snežana Vuletic: *The Novel as a ›Crisis Manager‹ in Contemporary Nigerian Culture: The Case of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). In: *Literature and Crises: Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations*. Ed. Elizabeth Kovach, Ansgar Nünning and Imke Polland. Trier 2017, pp. 239–250; also Nora Berning: *Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel Americanah*. CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.5 (2015): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2733>.

packed with the richness of genuine life. Each one of them has the potential to be turned into a novel. In *A Private Experience*, two women find themselves taking shelter in a miserable hut as a deadly riot rages in the street. One is a wealthy Christian Igbo, the other a poor Muslim Hausa. The women manage to communicate across the borders of ethnicity, class, and religion to offer each other specific medical assistance. The small practical things that they say to each other permit the big questions of war and peace to remain unsaid, but these are carried by the story anyway, much like James Joyce or Katherine Anne Porter, masters of the short story, would suggest an undeniable truth that is not spoken out loud but that stands in the room in larger-than-life letters: in this case, the knowledge that both women will face losses once they emerge from their »private experience.« In the title story, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie delivers a brilliant second-person narrative in which the insistently addressed »you« blends the writer, the young African woman trying her luck in the United States, and the reader – male and female alike – into an avatar of the suffering, taken-advantage-of, disillusioned young immigrant. Few recent texts except for Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* have hammered home the power of »you« as successfully as Adichie does in this story. The concluding story, *The Headstrong Historian*, is an homage to Chinua Achebe and a kind of sequel to his groundbreaking novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Adichie could not have sent a clearer signal indicating her literary ambition.

In *Americanah*, allusions to American, Caribbean and British writers abound, signaling Adichie's literary universe and her ambition. Before reaching the middle of the novel, the reader will have encountered references to Jean Toomer, Graham Greene, James Baldwin, Robert Frost, Chinua Achebe, V. S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, and Mark Twain. The novel's first paragraph is composed in such an artistic way that a separate essay should be written about it, in the manner of Ian Watt's famous 1960 »explication« of the first paragraph of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*.¹⁸ Ifemelu's presence on the campus of Princeton University resembles that of an ambassador, in fact. Her perception of the city of Princeton is sensory: it »smelled of nothing« in contrast to three other American cities she has visited. Ifemelu delights in Princeton giving her the ability to »pretend to be someone else«, to try on roles while

18 Ian Watt: The First Paragraph of »The Ambassadors«: An Explication. In: Essays in Criticism 10 (1960), issue 3, pp. 250–274.

abroad. Her delight is expressed in a four-fold sequence of sentences beginning with »She liked«, recalling the five-fold sequence of »She liked« in Ernest Hemingway's story *Cat in the Rain*. But Ifemelu is smarter and more attuned than the girl in Hemingway's Italy in the deflated beginning of the second paragraph: She »did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair.«¹⁹ Again, Adichie signals her literary ambition – and she delivers.

If I evaluate the quality of fiction in part by its ability to move me and to make me care, Adichie's writing offers a prime example of being able to do both. In a world in which stories vie for our attention, her evocation of Nigerian war and sexual patronage on the one hand – compare the story of Aunt Juju's early life in Nigeria as a kept woman in *Americanah* – and American racism and exploitation in all its forms on the other hand – compare Ifemelu's experiences at the University and in private employment – will ask readers to recognize themselves and their contributions, even unwitting ones, to the perpetuation of the systematic objectification of women. In *Dear Ijeawele*, Adichie writes, »I recently came to the realization that I am angrier about sexism than I am about racism.«²⁰ But I believe that Adichie's fiction reaches beyond the urgent topicality of sexism and racism, and that this writer has the opportunity to redefine the parameters by which we judge the relevance of fiction.

Along with other writers from across the world writing in a global anglophone environment, Adichie has the potential to help redefine the meaning of ›real influencer‹. The CNN story quoted at the outset, in my estimation, cheapens the term »influencer« by limiting it to its common economic significance. ›Influencer‹ is a catch-all term for persons who peddle endorsements of fashion and other consumer products to a gullible audience of youngsters. Adichie's true challenge lies in reaching beyond the pages of glossy magazines and their online equivalents. If, through her work, she can redefine the term ›influencer‹ to signify substance instead of commerce alone, she will be able to repurpose those aspects of her public self that I initially called ›popular‹ and ›serious‹. In the ideal world that we can strive towards though we cannot accomplish it, the serious would be popular, and the categorical distinction between them might fade. In the meantime, we can make do with courage and determination. As a ›real influencer‹, Adichie can make us

19 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Americanah*. Fourth Estate 2013, p. 3.

20 Adichie: *Dear Ijeawele*, p. 23.

want to know more about Nigerian history and about the legacy of colonialism. She can make us care more deeply about combating racism and sexism wherever it appears, and that we can contribute to their eventual eradication. And she can make us believe that true humanity far exceeds changing fashions or cosmetics. It can manifest itself in a life well lived when opportunities for living well are available to all. At that moment, the intensifying adjective ›real‹, which is at present quite meaningless, may be replaced by the more precise ›authentic‹ used in the sense outlined above: the authentic is that which distinguishes the subject from all that is not genuinely her own.