We Should All Be Feminists Study Guide

We Should All Be Feminists by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. We Should All Be Feminists. Anchor Books, 2015.

In this essay, the author argues for the need to start a conversation around gender and to reclaim the word "feminist" through a series of vignettes drawn mostly from her childhood and life in Nigeria. In an “Introduction,” the author explains that the following essay has been adapted from a public lecture she gave during a conference focused on Africa. She notes that “the word feminist, and the idea of feminism” has been “limited by stereotypes” (3), and expected that her speech would be unpopular. Nonetheless, the author says she decided to focus her talk on feminism because she is passionate about the topic and hoped to start a “necessary conversation” (4).

The author begins her essay with a memory of her friend Okoloma, who died in 2005 and who was the first person to call her a feminist. The author remembers that when she was 14 years old and arguing with her friend about books, Okoloma accused her of being a feminist. The author notes that Okoloma said the word “feminist” like one might say the word “terrorist.”

The author then transitions to a memory of a press tour she was doing in 2003 in Nigeria during which a man told her that feminists are unhappy and unable to find husbands. So the author decides to call herself a “Happy Feminist” (9). Then a Nigerian academic informed the author that feminism was “un-African” (10). In response, the author decides to call herself a “Happy African Feminist” (10). So many people give their definitions of feminism that eventually the author describes herself as “a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men and Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss and High Heels For Herself And Not For Men” (10). The author uses this example to show the extraordinary “baggage” (11) that the label “feminist” carries with it.

The author’s next memory comes from her childhood in Nsukka, Nigeria, when the position of class monitor was given to a boy even though she had the top score on the test. The author connects this incident to a broader pattern in which it becomes seemingly “natural” to see men in positions of power.

The author mentions many small incidents in Lagos, which are powerfully shaped by society’s expectations of gender. For example, the author recalls a time when she was out with a male friend and the valet thanked the man for his tip instead of the author, who had been the one to actually tip him. The valet had assumed he was her husband, and any of her money came from him. To create a different world, the author explains, we must start with the way we raise children, boys and girls alike.

The author then points out the ways in which boys are taught to reject vulnerability, to eschew showing weakness, and to associate masculinity with money. In contrast, girls are taught to “shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (28), to pursue marriage over their professional careers, and to view themselves and their sexuality with shame.

The author notes that she, too, is still trying to “unlearn” (38) the gender norms she internalized from childhood, and is sometimes unsure what it means for her to undo these gender norms. She recalls agonizing, on her first day teaching a writing class, over what outfit to wear and ultimately chose a severe, masculine outfit that she hoped would project authority and power; instead, the author felt uncomfortable and untrue to herself.

The author argues that we must have a conversation about gender that does not simply absorb feminism into a discussion of human rights and that is specific to issues of gender injustice. She writes we must all learn to think and talk about gender. She also writes that, rather than pitting class, race, or gender oppressions against one another, we must keep the conversations about them distinct. The author then implies that a conversation about gender must also interrogate culture itself and even change culture if it does not serve gender justice.

The author returns to her opening anecdote about her friend Okoloma. After Okoloma called her a feminist, the 14-year-old Adichie looked up the definition in the dictionary, and read that a feminist is someone who “believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes” (47). She realized that her grandmother, who never knew the word “feminist” was one, and she argues that more of us should adopt the word. Finally, the author gives her own definition of "feminist" as someone, male or female, who “says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better’” (48).

BOOKRAGS

Introduction - Page 16

Summary

The author's introduction explains that the following essay has been adapted from a public lecture that the author gave in 2012. As her topic, she chose feminism, which she notes has been "limited by stereotypes" (3) in much the same way that stereotypes have limited the way Africa is represented in literature, media and popular culture. She remembers that she expected her talk to be unpopular, and felt surprised and hopeful when she received a standing ovation.

The author begins her essay with an anecdote from an argument she had when she was 14 years old with her friend, Okoloma, who has since died in a plane crash. Okoloma, the author remembers, was the first person to call her a feminist. Though she did not know the word, she knew immediately that the word was "not a compliment" since he said the word in "the same tone with which a person would say, 'You're a supporter of terrorism'" (8). The author decided to look up the definition of the word at a later point, and continues arguing her point.

The author's next anecdote comes from an event during a 2003 press tour she took in Nigeria. When a male audience member cautioned her against feminism because feminists are perceived as unhappy and unmarriageable, she decided to call herself a "Happy Feminist" (9). When a female academic told her feminism was "un-African" (10), she decided to call herself a "Happy African Feminist" (10). Eventually, she decided to call herself the "Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men" (10). While this is largely facetious, she points out that feminism is a term made "heavy with baggage, negative baggage" (11).

The author's next anecdote comes from her primary school classroom in Nsukka, Nigeria. Although the nine-year-old version of the author earned the highest score on the class exam, the primary school teacher still gave the position of class monitor to a boy in the class because "the monitor had to be a boy" (12). In fact, the author points out that she was much better suited to being class monitor than the "sweet, gentle" (12) boy who was actually awarded the position. The author notes that she has never forgotten that incident because it is a symbol of the ways in which male power becomes naturalized from a young age.

The last anecdote the author shares in this section comes from a recent trip to Lagos, where she and her friend Louis decided to go to a restaurant. Despite being a "brilliant, progressive friend" (14), Louis believed that "'Everything is fine for women now'" (14). When the author tipped the valet as they were leaving, the valet thanked Louis rather than the author because he believed that her money had come from Louis because, as the author concludes, "Louis is a man" (16).

Analysis

The way in which the author, in her essay, introduces feminism is important because it suggests that feminism can be leveraged as a derogatory label used to describe certain people. Instead of introducing her definition of feminism immediately, the author chooses to begin her essay with an anecdote in which she (the young version of the author) does not know the definition of feminism. In fact, when her 14-year-old self was told that she was a feminist, she had never before heard the word. This suggests that being a "feminist" applies to certain ideological beliefs that someone, like the author, can hold without necessarily self-identifying as a "feminist." There is added significance to the fact that the author chooses to open her essay with an anecdote in which "feminist" is used as a pejorative term rather than as a compliment. In this sense, the author gives a rich example of what she means by her remark in her introduction that the word "feminist" has been "limited by stereotypes" (3). Through the opening anecdote, she shows an example of "feminism" being used as a label not only to stereotype the young author, but also to dismiss her views. As Okolomo uses the word, the label is negative.

The author's second anecdote further exemplifies how "feminism" is stereotyped, and the ways in which that stereotype is deployed to police and regulate self-proclaimed feminists. The man who cautioned the author that feminists are unhappy and cannot find husbands was attempting to intimidate and threaten the author into abandoning her feminist cause. To do so, the man relied upon stereotypes and misinformation about the population of the feminist community; they are not, as the author shows by claiming herself to be a "Happy Feminist" (9) uniformly unhappy or single. The female academic's concern that feminism is "un-African" (10) is a different attempt to regulate feminism. Because her vision of feminism is a narrow, western one, the woman dismisses feminism as a valid political position for African women. Here again, the author insists on the multiplicity and heterogeneity of feminists by rejecting the stereotype that feminism is western and identifying herself as a "Happy African Feminist" (10).

The author's description of her feminist identity uses tongue-in-cheek humor to point out the absurdity of the supposed rules governing who can and cannot be a feminist. The author suggests that these "rules" rely on rigid, narrow, and stereotypical visions of feminism. The author's repeated revisions to her identity—which grows longer and more complex with each new clause added—also reflects the ways in which these stereotypes actually put feminist-identifying women on the defensive. As a feminist, the author is forced to defend not only her feminist beliefs but also to fend off critics who accuse her of being inauthentic for wanting to wear high heels and lip gloss.

The author's next several anecdotes then leave behind this question of identifying oneself as a feminist in a society that disparages and dismisses feminists. Instead, the author explores how society disparages and dismisses women in general, which indirectly makes the case for feminism as a whole. Typically, the author's anecdotes, ranging from her experience in primary school to her experience in Lagos restaurants, are about the different forms of invisibility that women in public suffer. For example,

when the valet thanked Louis rather than the author for his tip, he was treating the author as an invisible non-entity. Because he associated Louis with power, influence, and money, Louis is visible to him while the author is seemingly invisible. Because the primary school teacher associated boys with traits such as power and dominance that are needed to be class monitor, she dismissed the female author in favor of a boy.

The author's primary school anecdote actually leads her into a discussion of the ways in which societal norms regarding femininity and masculinity are limiting to both boys and girls. The author is careful to note that the boy who is ultimately awarded the position of class monitor was kind, gentle and uninterested in ever being class monitor. Meanwhile, the young author was thrilled by the prospect of having power over her classmates. Thus, the teacher's inability to equate power with anything other than masculinity actually harmed both children. Gender norms effectively override each child's natural talents and aptitudes.

Vocabulary

concise, ovation, bristling, prospect, progressive, hub, fixture, metropolis, entrepreneurial, gesticulating, theatrics

Page 17 - 34

Summary

This section opens with the author’s pronouncement that “men and women are different” (17). The author says that for thousands of years it made sense that men, on the basis of their general physical strength, took on powerful, dominant rules in their societies. However, the author points out that today we live in a world in which the person most qualified to lead is “not the physically stronger person” but rather “the more intelligent, the more knowledgeable, the more creative, the more innovative” (18). Therefore, women, who are equally likely to have these attributes, must be viewed as equally capable of leadership.

The author returns to giving anecdotal evidence of sexism. She observes that, in Lagos, hotel staff assumed she was a sex worker when she enters a hotel alone, that women cannot get into Lagos nightclubs without being accompanied by a man, and that wait staff in restaurants greeted only the man when she entered the restaurant. Although these are “little things” (20), the author notes that “sometimes it is the little things that sting the most” (20). About gender injustice in general, the author explains that she is “angry” (21) and believes that, “We should all be angry” (21).

Noting that many of her American friends who work in the corporate world worry about seeming too aggressive or unlikeable, the author then directs her analysis towards the ways in which girls are taught to prioritize pleasing men over being true to themselves. In order to create a better world, the author writes that we must raise children of both genders differently. Boys learn to link masculinity with hardness and money, and to fear vulnerability, weakness and fear itself. Meanwhile, girls learn to fear success, to strive for marriage, and generally to “shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (27).

The author notes that these ideas, which impact women’s performance in the workplace and marriage life decisions such as marriage, are actually “internalize[d] ideas from our socialization” (30) as children. For instance, girls are raised to compete sexually rather than to compete for “jobs or accomplishments” (31). They are discouraged from being “sexual beings” (31) in their own right, praised for their virginity, and taught to view themselves with shame. Ultimately, the author suggests that the “problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are” (34).

Analysis

As a whole, this section dwells on the connection between the microscopic and the macroscopic in terms of feminism and social norms. Small things and tiny, seemingly insignificant moments, the author shows, are connected to much larger trends and patterns in thinking about gender. This operates in two ways in this section. Firstly, the author shows how different criticisms and encouragements for boys and girls develop

into entire, often quite warping, worldviews. Girls learn to see themselves as small; boy learn to avoid being small at all costs.

In keeping with this argument, the author traces a connection between small, seemingly random events in childhood and larger structures of women's participation in the workplace. Although the author claims that women are equally capable of possessing the intelligence, knowledge, and creativity to succeed in the modern workforce, she recalls a number of her female friends who work in corporate America and who struggle to assert themselves as leaders. By way of explanation, the author traces those workplace dynamics back to the ways in which children are socialized. In fact, the author seems to suggest that efforts to bring gender justice to the workplace must begin by rethinking the way we as a society raise children. For the author, the small lessons imparted to children, even in so much as a single phrase or critical comment, augment throughout a lifetime so that ultimately men and women find themselves trapped in tyrannical notions of femininity and masculinity.

There is a second way in which this section shows the connection between the microscopic and the macroscopic: the author mentions how short conversations with a friend and glances from hotel workers or restaurant staff “sting” (20). In fact, as the author describes it, these incidents sometimes “sting the most” (20). In fact, as the author describes it, these incidents sometimes "string the most" (20). The author admits the ostensible disproportion between the incident and her reaction to it. However, she justifies her reaction to such incidents by explaining that incidents such as these accumulate over the course of a lifetime--or even just over the course of a single day. Because they are repeated and never-ending, such small, "stinging" moments cause real pain and distress.

The author also claims that her sense of having been “stung” has a productive force to it since it is moments like this that make her angry. Anger, the author believes, can be a productive force. It may even be the intellectual and creative impetus behind the author’s passion for feminism and her decision to focus her public lecture on feminism. It is also considered a transgressive feeling for women, one that unsettles the expectation that women should be docile, quiet, and restrained. In other words, anger functions as an opposite or even antidote to women’s social conditioning, which as Adichie points out, expects them to “shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller” (27). Anger functions as a way of asserting, expanding, and defending the self.

In this sense, anger as much as other forms of cultivating and expressing intelligence, creativity, and knowledge are valuable, important avenues for women to protest restrictive notions of femininity and to unlearn “internalize[d] ideas” from their “socialization” (30). Unlike gender, which unfairly and restrictively “prescribes how we should be” (34), intelligence, creativity, knowledge and even anger are potential paths towards accessing truer, more authentic selves.

Vocabulary

prestige, alliterative, attribute, legitimate, harass, reputable, ostensible, unapologetic, predecessor, forgery, resentment, stifle, vulnerability, material, ego, breadwinner, emasculate, dismissible, exasperated, compromise, inherently, savage, homely

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Summary

The author explains that “socialization exaggerates the [biological] differences” (35) between males and females, which initiates a “self-fulfilling prophesy” (35). The author finds examples of this socialization in mundane moments, like the mother who does the same job as her husband yet thanks him for changing a diaper and the parents who tell their equally brilliant daughter to stop doing homework and cook Indomie noodles for her brother who is hungry.

The author notes that she is not immune from socialization either. She shares an anecdote of her first day as a writing instructor, when she opted for a “very serious, very manly, and very ugly suit” (38) rather than “shiny lip gloss and [her] girly skirt” (38). The author recognizes that she did so because, as a female, she felt the need to “prove [her] worth” (38) according to standards that take men as their norm. The author has since resolved to embrace her girliness, and to no longer “be apologetic about my femininity” (39).

The author then discusses how to have a productive conversation about gender, which may, she notes, “uncomfortable, sometimes even irritable” (40) to people and particularly threatening to men. The author rejects attempts to absorb discussions of women’s progress into a general discussion of human rights, which denies “the specific and particular problem of gender” (41). She also maintains that the conversation must be about gender, rather than being secondary to a conversation about class or race.

In the final two pages of the essay, the author returns to the opening anecdote of her conversation with Okoloma. She says that she eventually looked up the dictionary definition of a “feminist,” by which standards she realizes even her great-grandmother was a feminist though she was not familiar with the word. The author then proposes her own definition of a feminist: “a man or woman who says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better” (48).

Analysis

The beginning of this section illustrates how the author recognizes and struggles to resist her own “socialization.” The author identifies clear moments of socialization in which gender can be isolated as the only reason why one person does more work than the other. For instance, the author is clear that both the siblings in her Indomie noodles example and the spouses in her diaper-changing example have the same levels of intelligence and professional achievement. Despite this, it is considered “natural” for the females in both examples to pick up more of the household labor and cooking. Not only does the author identify these clear moments of socialization at work, she also criticizes socialization for the way it ultimately induces women to believe in their own inferiority.

Nonetheless, the author admits struggling herself to resist the pressure to project herself in particular, gendered ways. For instance, the author's anecdote regarding her outfit for her first day as a writing instructor is an important moment in the text because it suggests that even being a supposed authority and public voice on feminism does not immunize the author from her socialization. In fact, the author continues to grapple with society's notions of femininity and masculinity, and above all, with her internalized sense that she must somehow apologize for her feminine, girly preferences. Although she knows intellectually that this instinct to apologize for femininity comes from society's persistent valuing of masculine activities and pursuits above feminine ones, intellectually understanding her own internalization is not the same as dismantling all manifestations of that internalization. Even the author has progress to go, and resolutions to keep.

As the essay winds towards its conclusion, the author articulates one of the unspoken assumptions of her essay that may seem too obvious to ask outright: why is the author speaking and writing about this topic? In the final ten pages of her essay, the author encourages her readers (who were, during the essay's first iteration as a Ted Talk, her listeners and viewers) to initiate and to have conversations about feminism. The author's reference to the fact that it may be "uncomfortable" and "irritable" suggests that feminists should persevere in their efforts to start those conversations since both irritation and discomfort both describe the kind of fleeting or negligible pain that can be worked through. Readers will also notice that "We Should All Be Feminists" is in itself an effort to initiate that conversation around gender. In this sense, the end of "We Should All Be Feminists" harkens back to the author's description in the introduction of her Ted talk as a "necessary conversation" being held with a "family" that is "kind and attentive" while still "resist[ing] the subject" (4). In other words, Adichie's reference to "uncomfortable" and slightly "irritable" conversations echoes the introduction's image of a slightly uncomfortable family dinner.

The author also answers the original question that her conversation with Okoloma once sparked: what is a "feminist," and am I one? The author's return to the anecdote with Okoloma gives the work a circular cohesion. It also allows the author to revisit the uncertainty she described feeling when she was 14-years old, now with two decades greater experience in the world. In a sense, the readers, too, are wiser at the end of the book than they are at the beginning of it. In other words, the essay outlining the different stereotypes that feminists have faced and the problems that people of both genders face in the world today actually preps the reader to hear a definition of "feminist." No definition has yet been given in this work that actually includes the word "feminist" in its title.

In keeping with the author's constant attention to the ways in which people are multiple things and should be free to interpret their lives as they choose, the author presents the reader with not one but two definitions of feminism. The first comes from a dictionary. The second comes from the author herself. Although the dictionary definition is more formal and does not explicitly say that a feminist is "a man or woman" the way Adichie's does, the author does not suggest that one is more correct than the other. Neither does she suggest that there is any one definition of feminism. Rather than dwelling on the

specifics of the definition, Adichie uses it as a catalyst to her injunction to her readers that we “must do better” (48).

Vocabulary

exaggerate, self-fulfilling, crucial, nourish, internalize, incidental, irritable, oppress, trigger, diminish, evolutionary, omen, preservation, continuity, ancestral, deprived

Important People

The Author (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)

The author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who splits her time between Nigeria and the United States, uses this essay to encourage more individuals to recognize that there are deep-seated problems in the way gender works in the world today and to adopt the word “feminist.” Although the author does not give a straightforward autobiographical history, details from the author’s life surface time and again through anecdotes. For instance, readers learn that she used to read racy Mills & Boon books, that she has a brother, that she grew up in Nigeria in a university town named Nsukka, that now she prefers to spend her time in Lagos, and that she has multiple female American friends working in corporate America. The author uses these details to fuel her analysis of the way gender works in cultures and societies around the world, but particularly in Nigeria and the U.S. Generally, the author shares personal details of her life strategically, so that the final effect is an intimate, personal essay that takes as its subject gender injustice in the world rather than gender injustice in the author’s individual life.

Okoloma

As the first person to identify the author as a feminist, Okoloma has had a formative influence on her life. Interestingly, Okoloma intended “feminist” as an accusation of wrong-headeness, rather than a compliment. However, the author pays homage to Okoloma, who died in 2005, through her work and suggests that even dear friends and respected thinkers can be resistant to or dismissive of feminism. The conversations are nonetheless meaningful opportunities to engage with other people’s opinions, to defend your own, and hopefully to change minds.

Author's Grandmother

Although the author makes only one brief reference to her grandmother, it is clear that the opportunities available and restricted to her grandmother have formed an important part of the author’s feminism. The author remembers looking at her grandmother, who was a “brilliant woman” (35), and wondering what she would have become with greater opportunities in life.

Author’s Great-grandmother

Though she knows her great-grandmother through stories rather than in person, the image of the author’s great grandmother actually closes this text. She is suggested as a model of someone who was a feminist in her beliefs and actions, but who did not know the word. She has provided an inspiration to the author, both in the author’s feminism and author's belief that more people need to reclaim the word. In some sense, the

author's claim that we “should all be feminists” is a way of paying homage to her great-grandmother’s memory.

Louis

Described by the author as a “brilliant, progressive man,” Louis represents progressive men and women who are nonetheless resistant to feminism. At the end of the anecdote that the author shares, Louis is humbled by the realization that the valet has assumed he has money and power simply because he is a man. Louis is slow to this realization, but the fact of his realization suggests that his views on feminism may be changed by it.

Kene

In addition to her great-grandmother, the author also suggests her brother, Kene, as an exemplary feminist. The author explicitly mentions that Kene is a “kind, good-looking and very masculine young man” (48) in order to emphasize the ways in which Kene breaks the mold of who we expect a feminist to be.

Objects/Places

Lagos

Lagos provides the context for many of the author’s anecdotal observations of how gender operates on a small scale. The author, who is Nigerian, mentions that when she is back home she spends most of her time in Lagos, which is the “largest city and commercial hub of the country” (14). The author is both proud and critical of Lagos. For instance, she praises Lagos for having “more energy than London, [and] more entrepreneurial spirit than New York” (15). Yet, she is critical of the city for its dismissive, patronizing attitude towards women, especially young, single women.

Nsukka

As the city where the author grew up, Nsukka is another location important to this text. The author’s second anecdote describes Nsukka for her readers as a “university town in south-eastern Nigeria” (11). The fact that Nsukka is a “university town,” and thus a kind of intellectual hub in Nigeria, provides an ironic contrast to the unenlightened, retrogressive attitudes towards gender that the author’s primary school teacher holds.

The United States

The United States, where the author spends part of every year, plays a significantly less important role in this text than Nigeria. In fact, the author rejects the United States and the western world as the origin or exclusive proprietors of feminism, which she argues is for all, Nigerians and Americans alike. That said, the author makes several references to the experience of American businesswomen in the U.S. business world. She points out that these women may not face the same struggles over land that the author’s great-grandmother did, but these women frequently find themselves limited and burdened in the corporate world by their socially conditioned need to be “liked” by their coworkers.

Dictionary

The dictionary is the unexpected central object of this essay, as it is present in both the opening and closing anecdotes. In the opening anecdote, the dictionary functions as an object of knowledge and reference. The young, 14-year-old version of the author looks towards it as a source of knowledge, clarity and expertise on “feminism.” In the closing anecdote, the author provides the dictionary definition of “feminist” that she read all those years ago. However, at the end of her essay and more than two decades later, the author now overwrites the dictionary definition of feminism and provides her own definition of who a feminist is. In this sense, the dictionary is an instructive source of knowledge—but it is now subject to revision, critique, and alternatives.

Lip Gloss

Throughout this work, “lip gloss” is often mentioned and functions as a symbol of the way gender norms affect women’s and men’s life choices, even on the level of something like appearance and dress. The author first mentions liking lip gloss as part of the caveats to her self-identification as a “Happy African Feminist,” suggesting that liking lip gloss supposedly, just as being African, somehow goes against social expectations of what a feminist looks like. The author again mentions wanting to wear lip gloss on her first day as an instructor. Here again, the author chooses to wear a serious suit and to forego lip gloss because lip gloss is typically scorned as unserious, frivolous or simply courting the “‘male gaze’” (40). The author subverts these arguments by showing how gender norms that are about supposedly trifling things like lip gloss are part of a larger project of limiting full, true self-expression.

Themes

Childhood as Opportunity and Limitation

The essay, which opens with two back-to-back memories from the author's childhood, when she was 14 and nine years old, demonstrates the ways in which childhood operates as a period of important socialization and worldview formation in a person's life. The author shows the ways in which young boys and girls learn through this socialization how their society understands masculinity and femininity and how they should behave themselves accordingly. The author's argument in relation to socialization is diffused throughout this text. The argument begins with the author's premise that, "We are all social beings" (30). Thus, "socialization" involves the integration of the individual into a society—a process that involves both conditioning and compromise so that the individual can fit their expected role. These expectations and ideas of masculinity and femininity are "internalize[d]" (30), as the author describes at one point, so that the individual finds it difficult, if not nearly impossible, to see themselves outside their social context and gender stereotypes.

If socialization is an integral part of learning how to behave in society, it makes sense that socialization makes itself felt in childhood, when children are just starting to learn to see themselves in relation to their society. Typically, the author describes this socialization in terms of the limitations it places upon children. Frequently, the author emphasizes the narrowness of society's definitions of masculinity and femininity. She calls particular attention to the narrowness of masculinity by likening it to a "hard, small cage" (26) which "stifle[s] the humanity of boys" (26). If masculinity is stifling and cage-like for men, society's narrow definition of femininity is shrinking and minimizing for women. As the author writes, femininity expects women to "shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" (27). The metaphors reveal how both feminine and masculine stereotypes stifle children, a sign of the physical and emotional costs of social norms that force individuals to sacrifice their fullest self-expression in order to fit narrow, incomplete definitions of selfhood according to their gender.

However, the author suggests that there may be cause for optimism. Since childhood is a time when boys and girls are most vulnerable to socialization, it is also an opportunity ripe for intervention and change. Thus, the author repeatedly suggests that childhood is the place to "start" (25) creating "a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves" (25). Later, she asks the provocative question: "What if, in raising children, we focus on ability instead of gender? What if we focus on interest instead of gender?" (36). This question is important because it hints towards the possibility of creating an alternative process by promoting different values in our children, and by de-emphasizing their gender as an indicator of self-worth or value.

Anecdotes as Accumulated Social Signals

The bulk of this essay is comprised of personal anecdotes from the author's life, which lends the essay its characteristically intimate touch. However, the anecdotes also serve an important function in the essay because they actually exemplify the author's arguments about socialization and naturalization. Here, "socialization" refers to the process by which individuals with unique identities and selfhoods are integrated into a society. They are "socialized" when they learn to see themselves as social beings, according to the way society sees them. Meanwhile, "naturalization" refers to the ways in which repeated actions or descriptions make phenomena that are constructed in the social and political spheres, and that are in other words anything but "natural," seem "natural." Both "socialization" and "naturalization" are forms of mental conditioning that coerce individuals into seeing themselves according to particular concepts (such as gender), which appear as "natural" to a given social order.

The author's anecdotes highlight the ways in which gender roles are embedded deeply within both the individual and collective psyche. The author recalls that from a very young age, she was sent signal after signal of who she supposedly was and what she should was supposed to be doing. The anecdotes are rife with these signals. Okoloma's tone of voice when he said the word "feminism" signaled something about feminism without specifying it precisely. The primary school teacher's decision to award the position of class monitor to a boy instead of a girl also signals, without stating outright, something about female capability and worth. As they are represented in the anecdotes from the past, these signals never amount to complete definitions of either "masculinity" or "femininity."

After all, what socialization requires is not that the individual know exactly what they are being "socialized" into, but that they behave according to society's expectation of them. These kinds of social cues—for females, this might involve being told to be quieter, to be gentler, to settle for second place, to pursue marriage—accumulate in the same way that the author's anecdotes throughout this essay seem to accumulate. While the author points out that the word "feminist" may have baggage and social implications, the essay also shows how each individual person carries baggage, how he or she carries the weight of gender roles that were drilled into them long ago. "I have never forgotten" (13) the class monitor "incident" (13), the author writes. Although the author was able to use her memory of that incident to fuel her sense of outrage and her fight for gender justice, there may be unlucky others who have also "never forgotten" similar anecdotes from their childhood but who internalized rather than rejected the gender norms they represent.

The Importance of Conversation

From its very conception as a public lecture in the Ted Talk forum, this work believes in and professes the importance of conversation. As the author states in the introductory remarks, she believed at the time that her comments about feminism would be part of a

“necessary conversation” (4). In other words, the author believes—and is writing her essay, “We Should All Be Feminists”—in the belief that there is something urgent and pressing about having a conversation about feminism and gender.

As the essay suggests, conversations catalyze ideas, even if they do not go particularly well or if the people involved have disagreements. This idea is shown most clearly in the essay’s first anecdote, which opens with a conversation between Okoloma and the author. The conversation is fruitful, productive, and in some sense, life-changing for the author since it is this conversation that first introduces her to the word, “feminist.” Yet, this conversation features two people disagreeing. Okoloma and the author are “arguing” (8) as they usually do, and in fact “continue to argue” (8) even after Okoloma calls her a feminist. The anecdote speaks to the importance of respecting and anticipating dissension and disagreement in any healthy, productive, and difficult conversation. Sometimes, as the author’s memory of her public lecture suggests, these difficult conversations are well received and greeted with standing ovations. At other times, as the essay’s opening anecdote suggests, the conversation is difficult and only indirectly rewarding.

The essay acknowledges that gender is one such difficult conversation. As the author writes, “Gender is not an easy conversation to have” (40) and in fact, it can be “uncomfortable” (40). Yet, echoing the introductory remark that this conversation is nonetheless “necessary” to have, the author stresses that, “changing the status quo is always uncomfortable” (40). In other words, the author suggests that conversation carries within it the possibility of dramatic change for the way gender works in the world. With this in mind, the author uses this essay as a entry point into this important, “necessary,” and “uncomfortable” conversation.

Styles

Structure

By virtue of its origin as an orally delivered speech, this essay's structure is loose. Rather than abiding by clearly demarcated sections and subsections of analysis, this essay flows from one subject to another with occasional breaks visualized on the page. In general, the essay's structure advances from the past to the present moment, although the anecdotes it relays are not told in a linear fashion. First, the essay begins with one of the author's memories from when she was 14. The anecdote sets up the central question of the essay: What or who constitutes a "feminist"? Rather than move immediately forward in time to show how the author has answered that question, the essay moves still further back in Adichie's life, to a memory from when the author was nine-years-old. The initial structure of the essay thus suggests that feminist issues and examples of gender injustice date far back into an individual's life.

The author uses a more recent memory of her time in Lagos with her friend Louis as the catalyst for more general observations on how gender works today. In the middle section of the essay, the author touches on more global and public issues beyond the experiences stemming from her own life. These include her mention of the Lilly Ledbetter law, which was discussed around U.S. election time, as well as the prevalence of how-to guides and articles instructing women on how to get a man. The rest of this section vacillates between the social expectations she faces as a female (to get married, to compromise to pacify a man), and the social expectations that are placed upon boys and girls more generally. Within her general comments about how "we do a great disservice to boys" (26) and an "even greater disservice to girls" (27) in the ways in which "we raise," "teach" and "police" them (30), the author also intersperses specific examples of women "I [the author] know" (29) and the "female American friends I have" (23), and so on.

The last third or so of the essay marks yet another shift in tone, as the author admits that she too struggles with gender norms that she has internalized and than conversation around gender moving forward will be hard-going and uncomfortable at times. The essay then ends on a note that is honest and forthright about the challenges that still await a feminist future; however, this honesty provides an opening for the author to call her readers to action, to the hard work that is needed, in order to secure a happier, brighter future for all.

It is important to note, too, that the essay moves in a circle, its ending recalling the same image of its beginning. In the opening anecdote, the 14-year-old Adichie ponders the definition of a "feminist." In the closing paragraphs of the essay, the author provides not only the dictionary's definition of "feminist" when, decades ago, she first looked the word up but also her own definition. Through its twinned opening and ending, the latter answering the question of the former, the essay's structure demonstrates how much the author has grown and learned to articulate, assert, and defend her opinions and beliefs.

Perspective

As someone who spends part of every year in both Nigeria and the United States, the author’s perspective is comparative and international, if not quite global in scope. The first anecdote mentioned places the author in Nigeria, speaking to Okoloma, a fellow Nigerian. The second and third anecdotes the author mentions are also taken from conversations with Nigerians. Despite the Nigerian female academic’s concerns, the author is clear that she sees no contradiction between her particular place of birth and her belief in gender equality. In fact, from the early pages of the essay, the author is avowedly and determinedly “African”—as well as “Happy” and someone “Who Does Not Hate Men” (10).

The author’s perspective, and therefore the perspective of the essay, also changes as the author matures. In the early anecdotes, the author is uninformed about the word “feminist,” although she already has an intuitive understanding for what the word means. In the later anecdotes, the author understands and is able to identify moments of sexism and misogyny while she is in public: at restaurants, in nightclubs, entering hotels, on one of her speaking tours. This later author is also more reflective. Through anecdotes, she is able to reflect back on her past experiences and to process their meaning, for her own life and for the state of gender in the world. It is significant that, when she is older, the author also is not only informed about the definition of “feminist” but is self-assured and confident enough to set forth her own definition of the word, from her own perspective.

The author emphasizes her own personal perspective because, she writes, men and women are so eager to dismiss any claims of gender inequality. The author’s friend Louis is a good example of how people, especially men, are oblivious to gender inequality because they are not subjected to the targeted dismissal and invisibility that women face. At the beginning of the anecdote, Louis is “brilliant” and “progressive” but unable to see gender issues from the author’s perspective. As the author recounts, Louis would tell her, “ ‘I don’t see what you mean by things being different and harder for women… Everything is fine for women’” (34). Here, Louis’s problem is framed as a problem of vision and perspective. He does not “see what [the author] means” (34), and because he cannot “see” what she sees, he concludes that, “Everything is fine for women” (34). To the author, with her own perspective, it is “so evident” (34) that this belief is false. However, Louis’s perspective does not expose him to that belief. Only the valet’s treatment of the author while both she and Louis were at the restaurant gives him a chance to “see” gender discrimination up close. In this sense, the personal anecdotes invite the reader to see through the author’s eyes, as she encounters ordinary (as well as some extraordinary) moments of gender discrimination and injustice.

Tone

Because it is so laden with personal anecdotes from the author's life, the overall tone of this essay is intimate and personal as well. It treats the reader like a familiar, casual acquaintance—someone from whom very little is withheld or masked. Even the opening paragraph begins by giving the reader a sense of the intimate bond that existed between her and the now deceased Okoloma. Details ranging from Okoloma's "point… cowboy boots" (7) to the fact that the author still struggles to "put into words how I [she] felt" (7) suggest both that the author wants to communicate her experience to her readers (once upon a time, her listeners) and that there are limits to her ability to convey some thoughts and emotions.

In general, the author's tone is determined, resolute, and when she feels particularly thwarted and dismissed, angry. When discussing the "little things" (21), the moments that greatly "sting" (21) her, the author breaks her typical tone to explain that, "I am angry. We should all be angry" (21). However, Adichie does not stay angry for long. Instead, she quickly switches her tone, telling the reader that she is "also hopeful, because I [she] believe[s] deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for better" (21). As this example shows, the author is unwilling to dwell on the negative feelings of anger or resentment for long and prefers to show how these negative feelings can actually fuel positive change. Her tone, in this sense, is optimistic even in its darker moments.

Because this essay is so keenly aware of its audience and its role as a persuasive text, the author's tone can also be described as either searching or questioning. Quite literally, the author asks a number of questions to her readers, often beginning with either "What if?" or "Why?" For instance, she writes, "Why should a woman's success be a threat to a man? What if we decide to simply dispose of that word….emasculation" (28), "[W]hy do we teach girls to aspire to marriage, yet we don't teach boys to do the same?" (29), and "What if, in raising children, we focus on ability instead of gender? What if we focus on interest instead of gender?" (36). Through the author's "why" questions, she invites the reader to question received notions about the way society and gender norms operate. She invites them to probe deeper, and to ask if it is really necessary to think about gender in this one, limited way. Thus for example, the author encourages readers to question our assumption that women do all the household cooking by asking, "Why is that? Is it because women are born with a cooking gene or because over the years they have been socialized to see cooking as their role?" (35). The author's genuine question to the reader is accompanied by a somewhat "leading question," which leads the reader to adopt her same argument. Meanwhile, the author's "What if?" questions invite the reader to imagine alternatives to the gender system currently in place.

Quotes

But I remember that as I argued and argued, Okoloma looked at me and said, ‘You know, you’re a feminist.’ It was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, ‘You know, you’re a terrorist.’ I did not know exactly what this word feminist meant… The first thing I planned to do when I got home was look up the word in the dictionary.
-- The author (Section 1)

Importance: Here, the author's memory of the first time she heard the word "feminist" reveals the tremendous, negative baggage that the word has, such that a feminist is likened to someone who supports terrorism.

Then a dear friend told me that calling myself a feminist meant that I hated men. So I decided I would now be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men. At some point I was a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes to Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men.
-- The author (Section 1)

Importance: In this passage, the author satirizes the existing stereotypes and baggage that come with the term "feminist," and shows how feminists find themselves needing to explain, justify and defend themselves.

If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal. If we see the same thing over and over again, it become s normal. If only boys are made class monitor, then at some point we will all think, even if unconsciously, that the class monitor has to be a boy. If we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem 'natural' that only men should be heads of corporations.
-- The author (Section 1)

Importance: In simple, plain language, the author describes how the process of naturalization can lead to disastrous consequences for gender equality. As the author describes it, small, seemingly innocuous incidents in childhood that get repeated over and over again can become the foundation for much bigger gender inequities later in life.

And I would like today to ask that we should begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start: we must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently.”
-- The author (Section 2)

Importance: Here, the author articulates her vision for a "happier," "fairer" and more equal future world, and the initial step "we" all must take to get there: changing the way we raise children. It is significant that the author suggests that children of both genders must be raised differently.

Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. I am angry. We should all be angry. Anger has a history of bringing about positive change. But I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better.
-- The author (Section 2)

Importance: By referring to gender as an "injustice," the author frames gender equality as a matter of "justice." She also suggests that, like other unjust behaviors and actions, outrage and anger over continuing gender inequality is both appropriate and productive.

Masculinity is a small, hard cage, and we put boys inside this cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves, because they have to be, in Nigerian-speak, a hard man.
-- The author (Section 2)

Importance: This quote shows the dramatic impact that gender norms and roles have on boys' lives as well as girls'. From the small, stifling "cage" of masculinity, boys learn to fear and to hide.

Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Marriage can be a good thing, a source of love, joy and mutual support. But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage, yet we don’t teach boys to do the same?
-- The author (Section 2)

Importance: The author shows how even gender norms shape not only the expectations that girls and boys have for their lives, but also their aspirations. Here, the author implies that girls who (are taught to) "aspire" to marriage fall short of their much bigger potential.

The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are. Imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn’t have the weight of gender expectations.
-- The author (Section 2)

Importance: Gender, as this passage suggests, is a kind of fiction that does not accurately reflect reality, which would be comprised of individuals with complex identities beyond their biological sex--were they not held prisoners to confining gender norms.

Feminism if, of course, part of human rights in general – but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human.
-- The author (Section 3)

Importance: Here, the author insists on the need to discuss the particular problems

facing "female humans." While she does not dismiss the need to also discuss "human rights," she rejects attempts to substitute a "human rights" discussion for a discussion about gender and women's rights in particular.

Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.
-- The author (Section 3)

Importance: The author is unwilling to accept qualifications or justifications for women's equality, and even rejects the excuse of "culture." Culture, she claims, is always changing and must be changed to reflect and promote gender equality.

My great-grandmother, from stories I've heard, was a feminist. She ran away from the house of the man she did not want to marry and married the man of her choice. She refused, protested, spoke up whenever she felt she was being deprived of land and access because she was female. She did not know the word feminist. But it does mean she wasn't one.
-- The author (Section 3)

Importance: In this passage, one of the last in the book, the author uses the example of her great-grandmother to show that feminists and feminist beliefs can be found even among people who would never dream of using the word themselves.

My own definition of a feminist is a man or woman who says, 'Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.' All of us, women and men, must do better.
-- The author (Section 3)

Importance: Whereas the author once relied upon a dictionary to tell her what a "feminist" means, she now so claims and inhabits the identity that she provides her own definition of a "feminist." Her definition explicitly makes feminism available to both men and women, and eschews "jargony" mentions of patriarchy or misogyny in favor of plain language that anyone might say.

Topics for Discussion

The author recalls first hearing the word “feminist” in the same tone that someone might use to say, “You’re a supporter of terrorism” (8). How have you heard the word “feminist” used? Have you heard “feminist” used as a positive word or a negative one?

Here, readers are invited to put themselves into the author's shoes and remember their first encounter with the word "feminist." This question also helps readers understand the general anti-feminist atmosphere against which the author is writing.

On page 11, the author explains that the term “feminist” is a word “heavy with baggage, negative baggage” (11). What does the author mean by “baggage”? Can you think of other terms that also come with “negative baggage”? Are any of these terms also related to gender?

This question invites readers to think more about the consequences of saddling particular words, especially words related to gender such as "feminist," "femininity" or "masculinity," with this thing the author calls "baggage."

In her story about not becoming class monitor, the author explains that, “If we do something over and over again, it becomes normal” so that “if we keep seeing only men as heads of corporations, it starts to seem ‘natural’ that only men should be heads of corporations” (13). Can you think of examples from your own life in which certain expectations for both genders are “normalized” or “naturalized”? Does this principle apply only to gender? Can you think of any ways to break the cycle and to “de-naturalize” something?

Here, readers are invited to think more broadly about the ways in which gender is regulated according to a set of assumptions about what is "natural" or "normal." The question also encourages readers to think about ways of "de-naturalizing" those assumptions.

What gendered problem does the author see with the concept of marriage? Does she have a problem with marriage itself, or with the way in which marriage is effectively “marketed” to boys and girls? What kinds of different messages do girls and boys receive about marriage?

The author spends an extensive amount of time on the question of marriage in this essay. The author suggests that the ways in which boys and girls are taught to view marriage connects to the ways in which females are taught to value relationships (with males) before they value themselves.

When the author says that, “I am angry. We should all be angry” (21), what importance does she give to anger? How does the author see anger as something productive and fruitful for societal progress and for the gender justice movement?

Anger can be a potent weapon when it comes to agitating for change. This question asks readers to reflect upon and seek to understand the author's anger without judging it as reactionary or strident.

Why does the author claim that the search for a world of “happier men and happier women” (25) begins with the way we raise children? What is unique about childhood that makes it an important place to intervene?

This question, which reflects the essay's emphasis on childhood, asks readers to imagine why young boys and girls are uniquely vulnerable to societal messages about gender.

On page 26, the author explains that, “Masculinity is a small, hard cage, and we put boys inside this cage.” Why do you think the author chooses the metaphor of a “cage” to describe masculinity? What does this “cage” do to boys, and what kind of power does it exert?

Through the metaphor of the "cage," this question invites readers to think about the ways in which gender norms are confining and limiting to both boys and girls.

What lessons does society teach boys and girls? Please list them. Circle the ones that overlap, and draw arrows between the lessons that are exactly opposite to one another. For example, if boys learn to project themselves as always being big and strong, girls learn the opposite lesson: to “make themselves smaller” (27). How are these two gender norms related, and how do they both confine boys’ and girls’ “truer” (25) selves?

This question suggests an important exercise for readers hoping to understand the essay's central point. While boys and girls are socialized differently and subject to different notions of "femininity" and "masculinity," both boys and girls share the experience of having their true selves limited and confined by gender.

What kind of conversation does the author want to have about gender? What role does she see for class and race in that conversation? How do you think we should talk about gender, class, and race?

This question asks readers to think critically about what kind of conversation we need to have about gender, as well as whether and how it relates to other, equally necessary conversations happening about race and class.

How does the dictionary’s definition of “feminist” on page 47 compare with the author’s own definition of “feminist” on page 48? Do you see similarities between them, and can you spot any differences? How would you define a “feminist”?

This question asks readers to analyze the two definitions of feminism set forth in the essay, and to think critically about their own answer to the question posed in the essay: Who is a "feminist"?