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## **Review of *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions***

**Sana Goyal**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 2017), 66 pp., £10, ISBN: 9780008241032.

In her 2012 TEDxEuston talk titled ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ (published as a pocketbook in 2014), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remembers the first person to call her a feminist – she was fourteen and it was an accusation. It was certainly not a compliment, she clarifies.<sup>1</sup> She then relays her journey from discovering the meaning of ‘feminist’ in the dictionary, to first calling herself ‘A Happy Feminist’, later a ‘A Happy African Feminist’ and, finally, lightheartedly, ‘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’.<sup>2</sup> With a label as contested and surrounded by negative connotations as feminism, language is crucial, contextual, and changing; although Adichie’s personal explanations and engagements with feminism have evolved over her own lifespan, and empowered women the world over to continue to smash glass ceilings, equality is still a work in progress.

With her latest chapbook, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017), in sixty-one pages, fifteen suggestions, two feminist tools, and one letter, Adichie, now herself a mother, advises a childhood friend on how to raise her baby girl as a feminist. Her friend sent her a reply (the chapbook was originally written as a letter) saying she would ‘try’ to follow her suggestions. ‘And in rereading these as a mother, I too am determined to try’, says Adichie, in her introduction.<sup>3</sup> On juxtaposing Adichie’s two feminist texts, one realises her own journey as a twenty-first-century voice for feminism, from the assertive proclamation ‘*We Should All Be Feminists*’ (italics mine) to the apprehensive, personal ‘suggestions’ – Adichie initially ‘felt it was too huge a task’ and later hoped that the letter ‘would [serve] as a map of sorts for my own feminist thinking’, stressing that she does not have ‘a set-in-stone-rule’ (pp.

<sup>1</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All be Feminists*, online video recording, TED, December 2012, <[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_we\\_should\\_all\\_be\\_feminists](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists)> [accessed 09 September 2017].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 2017). All further references to this text will be supplied in parentheses.

3-7). But the potential of her premise remains as resolute, and renewed with vigour and vulnerability, as ever: ‘I matter. I matter equally’ (p. 8). That said, the chapbook comes with a caveat: ‘I have some suggestions for how to raise Chizalum. But remember that you might do all the things I suggest, and she will still turn out to be different from what you hoped, because sometimes life just does its thing’ (p. 9).

Throughout the manifesto, the reader revisits Adichie’s thoughts on feminism, including ideas first introduced in her TED talk. Although this is not fresh material per se, it comes from a fresh perspective and with newfound urgency – and perhaps herein lies its success. What Adichie wants you to understand is that you owe it to yourself as a woman, and a mother, and to your child, to try to be a feminist, no matter the fear of failure. But if you were to try, know that you must embrace feminism in its fullest form, she warns: ‘Beware the danger of Feminism Lite. It is the idea of conditional female equality’ (p.21). You cannot be on the fence about feminism: ‘Being a feminist is like being pregnant. You either are or you are not’ (p. 21), she adds. Such pointed one-liners pack a heavy punch, and the chapbook is full of them. Another favourite of mine is: ‘The knowledge of cooking does not come pre-installed in a vagina’ (p. 16). All through the book, Adichie’s perceptive wisdom is balanced with her particular penchant for wry humour, and the slim book is swallowed like a pungent pill – to be prescribed immediately to feminism’s misusers, and to misogynists, without further diagnosis.

In fact, each of the ‘suggestions’ can be summarised in single sentences. Adichie sometimes begins each chapter with a bang, while at other times, she artfully slips it in between anecdotes: ‘Teach her that the idea of “gender roles” is absolute nonsense’ (p. 15); ‘Teach Chizalum to read’ (p. 25); ‘Teach her to question language’ (p. 26); ‘Never speak of marriage as an achievement’ (p. 30); ‘Teach her to reject likeability’ (p. 36); ‘Teach her to question our culture’s selective use of biology as “reasons” for social norms’ (p. 48); and so on. The repeated and prescriptive verb ‘teach’, elaborated with Adichie’s earnest examples of everyday experiences, is what accomplishes her hopes for the book to be ‘honest and practical’ (p. 4) – it assures the reader of a tried-and-tested method, whilst also allowing for error and learning. Through conversations ranging from choosing toys (a helicopter over a doll, if she so desires), to cooking, careers, and clothes, she tackles gender-defined duties and sexual politics both within the domestic sphere and beyond it. ‘We have a world full of women who are unable to exhale fully because

they have for so long been conditioned to fold themselves into shapes to make themselves likeable' (p. 37), she says. In succinct and swift prose, Adichie gives women space to stretch their feet, and find their freedoms.

'We Should All Be Feminists' has been adapted for and appropriated by the fields of fashion (Maria Grazia Chiuri's debut collection for Dior in 2016) and music (Beyoncé's hit-single *Flawless*); it has also been misused, made mainstream, and consequently criticised as a cheap marketing ploy. It has opened Adichie 'to a certain level of hostility that [she] hadn't experienced before as a writer and public figure'.<sup>4</sup> It has also been distributed to every 16-year-old high-school student in Sweden. *Dear Ijeawele* suggests that we start the teaching of feminism sooner, because 'if we don't place the straitjacket of gender roles on young children, we give them space to reach their full potential' (p. 18). In her *New York Times* review, Zoe Greenberg further highlights that 'Ms. Adichie's first of 15 suggestions places a mother's freedom and growth at the center of a daughter's feminist education'; feminism, then, becomes a force you pass on, mother to daughter, woman to woman.<sup>5</sup>

In the world of women's writing, too, we see this force – alive, flourishing, and at full speed. Margaret Atwood's 1985 feminist dystopia, *The Handmaid's Tale*, has seen a revival on bookshelves and bestseller lists following its acclaimed television adaptation by Bruce Miller, which was released on Hulu in 2017. The prestigious 2017 Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction was presented to Naomi Alderman's self-proclaimed work of feminist science fiction, *The Power* (Atwood was Alderman's mentor and the book is dedicated to her).<sup>6</sup> Literary daughters are taking lessons in feminism from their literary mothers – and not just intertextually or technically. The force of feminism travels to the end of the world in Atwood's and Alderman's books. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's text travels to the beginning of a new world, a feminist world. Irrespective of the direction it has taken, feminism is on its way.

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<sup>4</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: "Can People Please Stop Telling Me Feminism is Hot?"', *Guardian*, 4 March, 2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/04/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-stop-telling-me-feminism-hot>> [accessed 09 September 2017].

<sup>5</sup> Zoe Greenberg, 'Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Blueprint for Feminism', *The New York Times*, 15 March, 2017, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/15/books/chimamanda-ngozi-adiche-dear-ijeawele.html>> [accessed 09 September 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Naomi Alderman, *The Power* (New York: Viking, 2016).