



Feminist Contradictions and the Evolution of Gender Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Fiction

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.68050/JAMS.2026.553>

Received: 20 Sept 2026; Accepted: 21 Sept 2026; Published: 24 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's fiction has consistently engaged questions of gender, patriarchy, female agency, marriage, sexuality, motherhood and the changing positions of African women. Yet her treatment of these concerns has not remained static. From *Purple Hibiscus* through *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* to *Dream Count*, Adichie's representation of women moves from the exposure of visible patriarchal oppression towards increasingly complex explorations of negotiation, choice, intimacy and emotional interiority. This article examines that development through the concept of feminist contradiction, arguing that Adichie's feminism cannot be understood simply as a movement from oppression to liberation. Her female characters often seek freedom while remaining attached to family, culture, motherhood, intimacy and forms of belonging that may themselves be shaped by patriarchal expectations. This article employs Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego feminism as its principal theoretical framework, with intersectionality serving as a supporting perspective. Nego feminism is particularly useful because it understands African women's resistance as involving negotiation, compromise, strategic withdrawal and confrontation rather than a single model of liberation. Through a comparative reading of *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and *Dream Count*, the article argues that Adichie's gender politics is better understood as a changing emphasis from political consciousness through negotiated agency to emotional interiority. The article concludes that the apparent contradictions in Adichie's feminist representation reveal the complexity of African women's lived experiences rather than necessarily indicating inconsistency in her feminist thinking.

Keywords: Nego feminism, feminist contradiction, female agency, negotiated agency, intersectionality, gender politics, emotional interiority

INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie occupies an important position in contemporary African literature because of the sustained attention her fiction gives to questions of identity, gender, culture, history and power. From *Purple Hibiscus* to *Dream Count*, her novels repeatedly return to women living within changing Nigerian and transnational environments. Her female characters encounter domestic violence, religious patriarchy, sexual expectations, racial prejudice, motherhood, marriage, migration and social inequality. Yet they are rarely represented simply as passive victims. They think, negotiate, desire, resist, withdraw, compromise and make choices.

Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (2010), observe that Adichie's narrative, despite its apparent simplicity, achieves considerable density through its controlled perspectives, contrasts of character and use of scenic motifs (p. 22). This narrative complexity is significant to the representation of women because Adichie's female characters are not constructed through a single model of victimhood or resistance. Their experiences often involve competing desires and obligations. Ulogu (2018), similarly observes a changing representation of African women in which female characters become more confident and increasingly capable of resisting patriarchal intimidation and abusive submission (p. 70). Okpala's study of *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* likewise identifies women's struggles, independence and the persistence of patriarchal structures as important dimensions of Adichie's representation of African womanhood. She argues that African women must confront the realities of sexist culture and assert their rights (2016, p. 79). These studies provide an important foundation for the



present article, but the article shifts the emphasis from resistance alone to the contradictions that accompany female autonomy. A woman may desire independence and still want intimacy. She may reject aspects of marriage and still desire companionship. She may challenge conventional expectations surrounding motherhood while experiencing motherhood as emotionally meaningful. She may resist traditional gender roles while retaining connections to family and culture.

The term feminist contradiction is used here as a descriptive analytical concept rather than as a new feminist theory. Critics are of the view that “feminism did not, and still does not, know whether to say that women are capable or vulnerable. If women are capable, they deserve to be independent, particularly of men; if they are vulnerable, they need to be protected, particularly from men (and yet, of course, by men)” (Mansfield, 2014). This gives an idea of the contradictions in feminist analysis. The most recent, also the most revealing, illustration of the contradiction can be found now in the movement on the campuses of universities to protect college women from sexual assault. According to Gorelick (1991), feminist contradiction, “gives voice” to hitherto silenced women by adopting “the view from below, and critically reviewing the literature on feminist methodology (n.d)”. Feminist contradiction, refers to tensions that emerge when female characters seek autonomy within social, cultural and emotional structures that they do not necessarily wish to abandon completely. The concept does not imply that Adichie's feminism is internally inconsistent rather, it identifies the complex circumstances within which women make choices.

This study therefore, argues that Adichie's gender politics is better understood as a changing emphasis than as a simple linear development. *Purple Hibiscus* strongly foregrounds political consciousness and domestic patriarchy. *Half of a Yellow Sun* expands female agency into history, war, class and national identity. *Americanah* introduces migration, race and transnational belonging. *Dream Count* gives increasing prominence to emotional interiority, sexuality, motherhood, disappointment and desire. These concerns overlap, and the later novels do not simply replace the concerns of the earlier ones. This study examines how feminist contradiction is represented through Adichie's female characters, and how Nego feminism illuminates their negotiated forms of agency. It highlights how marriage, motherhood, sexuality, economic independence, family obligation, cultural belonging, migration and emotional autonomy operate across the novels.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Existing scholarship on Adichie's fiction has established the importance of female agency, gender relations, women's emancipation, patriarchy, victimisation and feminist consciousness. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu's (2010), in *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Aesthetics of Commitment and Narrative* is significant for understanding the relationship between Adichie's social concerns and narrative technique. Their emphasis on controlled perspectives, character contrast and scenic motifs provides a basis for examining the ways in which gender politics is embedded in narrative form (2010, p. 22). Ulogu's discussion of women in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and Adichie identifies a changing portrait of African women. She observes that “contemporary female characters are increasingly represented as confident individuals who resist patriarchal intimidation and abusive submission” (2018, p. 70). This observation is relevant to the present study because it establishes the movement from female submission towards agency.

Okpala (2016) examines women's struggles and independence in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, drawing attention to the redefinition of African womanhood and the persistence of patriarchal structures. Her argument that African women must confront sexist culture and assert their rights provides an important basis for examining resistance and autonomy in Adichie's fiction. Kivai (2015) examines female voice and gender relationships in *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. His work is useful to the present study because female voice is central to the movement from silence to agency in the earlier novel and to women's participation in historical experience in the latter. The existing scholarship therefore demonstrates that Adichie's women can be read as active participants in the negotiation of gender relations.

Other scholarship has examined victimisation, sexuality and gender identity in Adichie's fiction. Alharbi (2023), for instance, focuses on representations of African women's victimisation, while Sebola (2022) considers selected themes in Adichie's fiction alongside her feminist manifesto. These studies reinforce the



significance of patriarchy and feminist consciousness in Adichie's work. The present study builds upon these interventions but shifts attention towards the **tensions within agency itself**. Rather than asking only whether Adichie's women resist patriarchy, it asks how they negotiate relationships, obligations and desires that may simultaneously empower and constrain them. The study therefore introduces feminist contradiction as an analytical term and places it within Nnaemeka's Neco feminist framework.

Theoretical Framework

Neco feminism provides the principal theoretical framework for this study. Nnaemeka's formulation is particularly relevant to African women's experiences because it understands feminism through negotiation, give and take, compromise and strategic engagement with patriarchal structures. She calls attention to the importance of an African perspective grounded in the priorities and realities of local communities (Nnaemeka, 2004). Neco feminism does not reduce resistance to direct confrontation. Women may challenge patriarchal structures while simultaneously negotiating the social relationships within which they live. This is particularly relevant to Adichie's female characters, many of whom do not seek to destroy family, marriage, motherhood or cultural identity. Instead, they attempt to reshape their relationships with these institutions. For this article, four principles of Neco feminism are particularly useful. First, female agency is contextual rather than absolute. Second, negotiation and compromise can constitute forms of agency. Third, resistance may be direct or indirect. Fourth, relationships and cultural structures remain important to women's choices.

The concept of feminist contradiction complements this framework. It refers to the coexistence of apparently competing desires, obligations or forms of agency. It is distinct from ambivalence, which describes divided feelings; from negotiated agency, which refers to the exercise of choice within constraints; and from intersectionality, which explains how gender intersects with race, class, nationality and other structures of identity. Feminist contradiction focuses specifically on the tensions produced when these forces operate simultaneously. Intersectionality, following Crenshaw (1989), is therefore used as a supporting perspective rather than a second principal theory. It is particularly useful in *Americanah*, where gender intersects with race, migration, class and nationality.

The study employs comparative qualitative textual analysis. The principal analytical categories are marriage and intimacy, motherhood, sexuality, economic independence, family obligation, cultural belonging, migration and emotional autonomy. Representative female characters include Kambili, Beatrice and Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*; Olanna and Kainene in *Half of a Yellow Sun*; Ifemelu in *Americanah*; and Chiamaka, Zikora, Kadiatou and Omelogor in *Dream Count*.

Political Consciousness in *Purple Hibiscus*

Purple Hibiscus presents one of Adichie's clearest examinations of patriarchal authority. Eugene Achike is wealthy, publicly admired and strongly committed to his Catholic faith, yet his private household is marked by fear, violence and rigid control. His authority regulates the lives of his wife and children. Kambili's silence is therefore not merely a personality characteristic. It is produced by an environment in which speech can become dangerous. Her movement towards agency begins when she encounters Auntie Ifeoma's household, where disagreement, laughter and questioning are permitted. Ifeoma represents a form of female authority that does not depend upon domination. Her household demonstrates that authority can coexist with participation and dialogue.

Amaka pick up a comb and ran it through the ends of her short hair. Then she turned to me and asked, "Why do you always lower your voice"

"What?"

"You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers" (Adichie, 2006,p.125).

Amaka's blunt question is the first time someone directly confronts Kambili about whispered speech, until this



moment, Kambili hadn't even realized she was lowering her voice, it was instinctive, deeply ingrained response to her father's control

Beatrice provides a more complicated form of agency. She suffers domestic violence but initially remains within the marriage. Her explanation to Ifeoma reveals the material, social and emotional pressures that make departure difficult: "where would I go if I leave Eugene's House" (Adichie, 2006, p. 255).

Beatrice's eventual poisoning of Eugene is significant because it emerges after prolonged endurance. Her apparent silence therefore cannot be interpreted simply as passivity. It represents survival within a violent structure followed by direct action when other possibilities appear limited. The novel consequently presents several forms of female agency. Kambili develops a voice, Beatrice negotiates survival, and Ifeoma constructs an alternative model of authority. The women do not follow one feminist formula. Their different responses demonstrate the usefulness of Nego feminism, which recognises that agency can involve observation, adaptation, negotiation, withdrawal and confrontation. The feminist contradiction in *Purple Hibiscus* therefore lies in the coexistence of resistance and attachment. Kambili seeks freedom without ceasing to belong to her family. Beatrice remains within marriage while eventually resisting its violent structure. Ifeoma exercises independence while continuing to operate within family and cultural relationships.

Half of a Yellow Sun moves beyond the predominantly domestic environment of *Purple Hibiscus* into the historical landscape of the Nigerian Civil War. The novel demonstrates that female agency is shaped not only by gender but also by class, sexuality, ethnicity, family and historical violence. Olanna and Kainene represent contrasting forms of female agency. Olanna is emotionally open and strongly invested in intimate relationships, while Kainene is commercially competent, direct and self controlled. Onukaogu and Onyerionwu describe Kainene's managerial competence, fearlessness, decisiveness, determination and compassion as central to her ability to sustain the refugee camp under severe wartime conditions (2010, p. 207).

"It's best if you move your things to Port Harcourt until we drive the Nigerians back"

Kainene said. She was scanning a newspaper and nodding her head to the Beatles on the stereo and she made it seem normal, that war was the inevitable outcome of event and that moving his things from Nsukka was simply as it should be (Adichie 2006, p, 129)]

This scenario demonstrates that Kainene's agency is expressed through competence and responsibility rather than merely through opposition to men.

Olanna's experience introduces another dimension. Her emotional relationships expose the tension between attachment and independence, while the war exposes her to political violence. Her body becomes a site where personal vulnerability and historical violence meet.

Olanna's Dark Swoop began the day she came back from Kano, the day her leg failed. Her legs were fine when she climbed down from the train and she did not need to hold on to the blood-smeared railings; they were fine as she stood for three-hour drive to Nsukka in a bus so crowded she could not reach out to scratch her itching back. But at the front door of Odenigbo's house, they failed. So did her bladder. (Adichie, 2006, p, 194)

This is a powerful illustration of how historical violence, specifically the Kano massacre that Olanna witnessed rewrites the meaning of female agency.

The narrative therefore complicates a simple conception of feminist liberation. Olanna and Kainene possess different forms of agency, but both are shaped by circumstances beyond individual control. Their experiences support a Nego feminist interpretation in which agency is exercised within, rather than outside, social and historical constraints.



Americanah extends Adichie's examination of female agency into the transnational sphere. Ifemelu's experience demonstrates that gender cannot be separated from race, class, nationality, migration and cultural identity. Her movement between Nigeria and the United States transforms the conditions under which she understands herself.

Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't 'black' in your country? You're in America now. We all have our moments of initiation into the society of Former Negroes. Mine was in a class in undergrad when I was asked to give the black perspective, only I had no idea what that was. So I just made something up. (Adichie, 2013, p, 325).

Here, race is described as a social and historical construct that is learned and imposed, not inherent. Ifemelu's identity is not a singular, fixed category but a cite of intersecting forces, nationality, gender, and race, that are redefined by American context. Ifemelu arrives America with a strong, pre-existing identity as a Nigerian woman, an identity shaped by ethnicity (Igbo), class (educated, middle class), and culture. In Nigeria, she was not "black"; she was Igbo, Nigerian, a member of a specific community. America, however, flattens these distinctions, rather projecting her nationality and ethnicity as rendered invisible or irrelevant by the American racial binary, which demands she choose a single, overarching category, Black. This is not a choice she makes; it is one that is made for her. She is "initiated" into a new identity, one that erases the specificities of her black background to serve a broader, American-defined social order.

Her blog also represents an important form of public agency. Through writing, she transforms personal observation into social criticism.

So whiteness is a thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course, but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. Probably don't really like pale skin but they certainly like walking into a store without some security dude following them. Hating your goy and Eating one Too, as the great Philip Roth put it. So if everybody in America aspires to be WASPs, then what do WASP aspire to? Does anyone know? (Adichie 2013, p, 125).

The blog gives Ifemelu authority as an interpreter of social experience. Her agency therefore operates not only through personal decisions but through the power to name and analyse social structures. Yet independence does not eliminate emotional vulnerability. Ifemelu's relationship with home and with Obinze complicates any simple understanding of liberation as permanent separation.

Emotional Interiority in *Dream Count*

Dream Count intensifies the attention to emotional interiority already present in Adichie's earlier fiction. The novel places Chiamaka, Zikora, Kadiatou and Omelogor within different social and emotional circumstances while connecting their experiences through desire, sexuality, motherhood, intimacy, disappointment and self knowledge.

In this new suspended life, I one day found a gray hair on my head. It appeared overnight, near my temple, tightly coiled, and in the bathroom mirror I first thought it was a piece of lint. A single gray hair with a slight sheen to it. I unfurled it to its full length, let it go, and then unfurled it again. I didn't pull it out. I thought:

I'm growing old. I'm growing old and the world has changed and I have never been truly known. The great longing of my life was to be known. A rush of raw melancholy brought tears to my eyes. This is all there is, this fragile breathing in and out. Where have all the years gone and had I made the most of my life, but what is the final measure for making the most of life, and how would I know if I had?" (Adichie 2025, p, 11).

This shows that professional and personal independence do not eliminate the desire for intimacy. Chiamaka presents a model of feminism in which autonomy is equated with emotional detachment.

Zikora introduces motherhood as another site of contradiction.



He was hers and his tiny translucent arms lay precious against her skin. He was hers. She would die for him. She thought this with a new wonder because she knew it to be true; something that had never been true in her life now suddenly was true. She would die for him. A new lurch in her chest, utterly alien; the intense urge to live, to stay alive, for somebody else besides herself. (Adichie, 2025, p. 146).

This captures the moment Zikora first holds her son after a traumatic birth, abandoned by Kwame, her body still raw and stitched. It is a perfect site for examining motherhood as a contradictory, non-binary experience, neither the patriarchal trap that second-wave feminism warned against nor the uncomplicated fulfilment that pronatalist culture promises.

The passage opens with "He was hers," a possessive claim that is immediately complicated by the overwhelming nature of the bond. Zikora is no longer solely her own; her existence is now tethered to another in a way that feels "utterly alien." This is not the language of liberation; it is the language of a self being reorganized around a new centre. The "intense urge to live" is not for herself—it is "for somebody else besides herself." The sovereign individual who built a career, navigated a demanding law firm, and pursued an independent life in America is, in this moment, displaced. Motherhood here is not an expansion of the self but a radical decentring of it. This echoes the feminist critique of motherhood as a site where women's autonomy is subsumed, but it also refuses the reductiveness of that critique by showing that this decentring is experienced not as violation but as "wonder."

Kadiatou introduces another dimension: unequal capacity for negotiation.

Men lit up when they heard she was a widow. They would have lit up even if she had a revolting face. She was a widow and a widow walked trailing behind her the scent of defenseless availability. She served at the beachside restaurant, enduring their leers, knowing they saw her as an opportunity, because men were men. She began covering her hair, and she kept her expression pleasant with her eyes and not her lips; there was no smile that a man might misread. She did not expect the owner, François, a busy, important man, to protect her, but he barked at the men who did more than leer: one who brushed her hip, and another who grasped her arm as she placed down a plate. She was grateful that he deigned to protect her. (Adichie, 2025, p. 192–193)

This evidence is important because Nego feminism does not imply that all women possess equal resources with which to negotiate patriarchal structures. Economic and social circumstances affect the possibilities available to women. Nego feminism does not assume all women possess equal resources to negotiate patriarchy. Kadiatou's vulnerability is produced at the intersection of widowhood, migration, economic precarity, and race. As a widow, she is marked by "defenseless availability"; as a migrant worker, she lacks the language, legal status, and social capital to refuse male predation. Her self-policing covering her hair, keeping her expression neutral, is not empowerment but survival. She endures leers and gropes because she has no good options, and her gratitude toward her boss François for "deigning" to protect her reveals the precarity of her position: her safety depends on the whims of one man who shields her from others.

The bitter irony is that François, the man she is grateful to, will later rape her in the storage room. This demonstrates that the "protection" patriarchy offers women like Kadiatou is conditional, revocable, and ultimately self-serving. She cannot negotiate patriarchal structures because she has nothing with which to negotiate. Her agency is constrained to endurance rather than resistance. The situation forces us to understand that for women like Kadiatou, survival often means absorbing exploitation rather than confrontation. It x-rays the fact that the men who offer protection are often the same men who pose the greatest threat. This is the material reality. Her vulnerability is not a personal failing; it is a structural condition produced by the intersection of gender, race, migration, and class. The reality forces us to confront the uncomfortable truth that for women like Kadiatou, survival often means enduring exploitation rather than resisting it, and that the men who offer "protection" are often the same men who pose the greatest threat.

Omelogor provides a further dimension through her professional confidence and engagement with sexuality.

Who do you think teaches men stuff? I didn't respond because I didn't want to continue the conversation about



porn, and his lopsided smile seemed suddenly unsavory, as if he had seamy sides to him that I did not know, but I thought of his words, Who do you think teaches men stuff?, and I began to feel sorry for men. Can this be said, that I began to feel sorry for men? Some time passed before I set up an anonymous website and paid for analytics and advertising, and in weeks I had men sending messages to me, an anonymous woman who would tell it like it is, but was on their side. (Adichie,2025, p, 344).

Here, Omelogor's agency operates through intellectual and sexual questioning rather than simple rebellion. Her creation of 'For Men Only', an anonymous website advising men on sex and relationships directly challenges conventions of female respectability. A "respectable" woman is not supposed to be knowledgeable about pornography or speak publicly on sexual matters, especially to men. By becoming the expert who "tells it like it is," Omelogor claims intellectual and sexual authority while using anonymity to evade the patriarchal censure that would silence her by name. Her sympathy for men is equally subversive: she recognizes that pornography teaches men badly, damaging everyone within patriarchy, without excusing male behaviour. This refusal of both easy misandry and apology is the hallmark of her agency. She neither accepts the terms of respectability nor abandons the possibility of speaking to and for women. Her agency is thus situated and strategically a Nego feminist negotiation with patriarchy rather than a fantasy of escaping from it.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined changing gender politics in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Americanah* and *Dream Count* through the concept of feminist contradiction and the theoretical framework of Nego feminism. The analysis demonstrates that Adichie's representation of female agency cannot be reduced to a simple movement from oppression to liberation. Her women operate within complex relational, cultural, historical and emotional environments. Their agency is therefore frequently negotiated rather than absolute. *Purple Hibiscus* foregrounds political consciousness and patriarchal authority. *Half of a Yellow Sun* expands female agency into war, history and national identity. *Americanah* introduces the complications of race, migration and cultural belonging. *Dream Count* intensifies attention to emotional interiority, sexuality, motherhood and desire.

The concept of feminist contradiction helps explain these changing emphases. It identifies situations in which autonomy coexists with attachment, independence with vulnerability, and resistance with negotiation. It does not suggest that Adichie's feminism is inconsistent. Rather, it recognises that women may make choices within structures they simultaneously challenge and value. Nego feminism is particularly useful because it permits resistance to be understood beyond direct confrontation. Adichie's women sometimes alter the structures around them, negotiate with them, move around them or create alternative spaces within them. This is especially important in interpreting characters whose choices might otherwise be dismissed as insufficiently radical.

The development across the four novels is therefore better understood as an expansion than as a linear progression. Adichie's earlier fiction exposes structures that silence women, while her later fiction increasingly explores the emotional and relational worlds that remain after women acquire greater capacity to speak, choose and negotiate. The movement from political consciousness towards emotional interiority does not represent a retreat from feminist politics, rather, it demonstrates that gendered power operates not only through visible institutions but also through love, sexuality, motherhood, memory, cultural belonging, disappointment and desire. Adichie's evolving gender politics consequently offers a more complex account of contemporary African womanhood in which liberation involves not only resistance to external structures but also the difficult negotiation of the self.

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