

“It’s difficult.
Very difficult!”

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is well-known around the world mostly because of her feminist writings and TED talks. Raising her four-year-old daughter in a feminist way, however, has turned out to be much harder than expected





A video filmed in London in December 2018 shows how significant Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has become. Adichie is seen taking a seat next to Michelle Obama, whom she is about to interview about her memoir *Becoming* in front of a rapturous audience. “Alright everyone, deep breath! She’s here for an hour,” Adichie announces. “I’m excited,” Obama interjects, “because I’m on stage with this woman who I’m fangirling here!” It’s hard to think of an African writer who has had more impact in recent years than forty-two-year-old Adichie, who was born in Nigeria. She is the rare intellectual who commands both critical praise and a huge appeal in popular culture. Beyoncé has sampled lines from Adichie’s TED talk *We Should All Be Feminists*. The Oscar-winning actress Lupita Nyong’o is turning her novel *Americanah* into a series for HBO. It tells the story of a young woman from Nigeria who moves to the US expecting a more progressive society. To her surprise, she encounters more racial division in her new home country than she did in her old one. So how does Adichie view her own journey from growing up in Nigeria to taking the world stage?

Ms. Adichie, your writing has become well-known around the world. Do you remember the first story that you ever wrote?

The first story I remember was in first grade, when I was six years old. The main character was a girl, I think her name was Anne. I don’t remember what happened to her, but I had drawn a picture of the girl. It was about four pages so it was looong for a six-year-old.

You were only six? In Germany, most kids only start to learn reading at that age.

I learned to read and write when I was at nursery school. At the age of four or five, I was teaching my grandmother simple words because she was not literate. I have this memory of sitting on the veranda of our house in Nigeria with her. We had a little blackboard, and I was writing the letters and asked her to repeat after me: c-a-t – “cat.” And she did (*laughs*)! I had a very patient grandmother.

Those early stories of yours – were they inspired by your own experiences or by the books you read?

As a child, I was reading books about people in England and America because these were the books that were easy to find. The university, where my father taught, was affiliated to a university in the US. The children in these books were living in an environment that was very alien to me, playing in the snow and eating apples. They had nothing to do with the world I was living in. I felt that a book was something that white people did things in. So when I started writing, my characters had blue eyes and blonde hair.

Adichie likes to use her fame and influence to promote the work of Nigerian designers. Here she is wearing a yellow top from Grey Projects

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 42, was born in Nigeria and is one of Africa’s most influential authors. She lives in Lagos and in a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland. Her books were international bestsellers. This year, HBO will release a TV series based on her novel *Americanah*

Your father was the first professor of statistics in Nigeria. Your family lived on the campus of the university town Nsukka. Can you describe the world you grew up in?

Campus was a gated community, a small closed world. We had our own libraries, schools, a medical center, a church. Church was important, I grew up Catholic. I get very nostalgic for my childhood because sometimes you don’t realize what you have until later. I grew up loud and having a voice, I grew up reading books which is really, really essential for who I am. My parents encouraged it, but they never thought I would make a living from writing.

Adichie speaks with a warm and deep voice, frequently erupting into laughter. She is calling from Nigeria where she spends the winter months with her family before returning to her house in a suburb of Baltimore, Maryland, in the US. She’s constantly on the move, visiting different countries almost every month to do readings at literary festivals, give lectures, or attend fashion events like Paris fashion week.

In Lagos, a megacity defined by chaos and disruption, Adichie lives in a house she built in a part of town that was swampland twenty years ago and now has homes worth millions of dollars. According to the *New Yorker*, Adichie’s fame there is such that strangers occasionally pick up her bill in restaurants. In Nigeria, her books are among the most pirated works, along with the Bible and the writings of T. D. Jakes, the pastor of an American megachurch. Her parents, who are in their seventies and eighties, live in their ancestral hometown of Abba, which is seven hours away. She and her five siblings, who are scattered all over the world, visit them every Christmas. Her husband, a physician, is also from Nigeria.

What is it like for you to be in Nigeria nowadays? Do you consider it your home?

I have two homes, but Nigeria is where my heart is. It’s where I feel I can make a difference. It’s also the place that most frustrates me, I always complain about everything. Like this morning – we were running the generator all night because of an electricity cut, this morning it came back on. But there is very little voltage, the fan is very limp, you can’t put the air conditioning on. So I’ve been sending text messages to friends to find out who is in charge of electricity in my part of Lagos. Then I wanted to get some soup and it took forty-five minutes because the car broke down, so I complained about that.

At the same time, I have laughed more than I would have in the US.

Why is that?

Because it's a place full of laughter! Our government has recently closed down the border to reduce imports of food and commodities, but it hasn't done anything to ensure that we can produce self-sufficiently. Food prices have gone up, so people are scrambling to provide for their families. The woman who braids my hair is complaining how difficult life has become. My middle-class friends are complaining that their life is harder now. But they're also laughing. It's light-hearted, but it's also a means of coping.

You came to the US at the age of nineteen to study and later said that you were astonished to see how little people there knew about Africa. Your roommate expected you to listen to tribal music.

There's a very outdated view of Africa as a place of jungle and war. I hadn't realized how common it was until then. Where did that come from? My roommate and many people at that time saw TV programs about giraffes and lions, or war and AIDS. It's changing a bit but it's still there. Most people do not see the complexities of Africa.

Your daughter is four years old now, she is growing up in the US as well as in Nigeria. Does she have a preference?

I think she likes both, but she seems more alive in Nigeria. There are more people, her cousins. I involve my friends, I want her to have that village feeling. She's currently outside playing football.

Adichie had her big breakthrough in 2013, when she spoke about her experiences of gender inequality in a TED talk called *We Should All Be Feminists*. She was nine years old when her teacher told the class before a test that the student with the highest score would be given the honorary position of "class monitor." Adichie worked hard, got the best result, but the boy with the second-highest score got the job. Her teacher had forgotten to tell the class that only boys could become class monitor. The book that came out of this TED talk became an international bestseller.

Adichie's latest book *Dear Ijeawele* (2017) is part feminist manifesto and part parenting guide. After a friend had asked her for advice on how to raise her daughter in a feminist way, Adichie replied with a letter, which she first posted on Facebook and then published as a non-fiction book. "Her job is not to make herself likeable," she tells her friend with regards to her daughter. "Her job is to be her full self." *Dear Ijeawele* is told through personal anecdotes and in a warm tone; now that I speak to her I realize that it echoes her voice.

This may be the special gift of Chimamanda Adichie: Even though her own life is somewhat unusual, she has found a universal language to talk about it. Many of her stories touch on the injustices a black woman faces, yet she never comes across as aggressive or ideological. Being angry is a good thing, she says. But when talking to people about sexism or



Adichie was photographed in Lagos, where she spends several months each year. Her coat is by the Nigerian label Meena

racism you have to put your rage aside because it can make others switch off and not listen to you.

I'm curious to know how you came up with the parenting advice. Did you write *Dear Ijeawele* when you were pregnant with your daughter?

No, I wrote the book about a year before I got pregnant. I think it's easy to give advice when you're not a mother – then you have a baby and everything changes (*laughs*). I wouldn't change anything in the book now. But after each suggestion, I would add: It's difficult. Very difficult!

What do you find particularly challenging about being a mother?

It sometimes feels like the world is in a conspiracy against you. You're trying to create a feminist world for your child, but it becomes an alternative world. At home, we are teaching our daughter that there's no such thing as a boy's toy or a girl's toy. Toys are toys, and you can be interested in whatever you're interested in. Then she goes to school, comes back and says: "This is for boys!" Children are very vulnerable to the powers of their teachers. Just because the teacher says something, she thinks the teacher is right and her parents are wrong.

Really? She listens to her teacher more than to her parents?

Oh yeah! She also listens more to her friends, and she's four years old!

That's interesting.

I find that education in both countries is quite conservative. The teachers will say: "Boys are rough and girls are gentler." And I'm thinking: The more you do that, the more you give boys room not to be quiet. I worry about the school of my daughter. In the US, there is an alternative school, but it's almost an hour and a half away. And in Nigeria there isn't even another option. Children here are reading at the age of four, but social skills are not emphasized much. In Nigeria they want the child to know multiplication by the age of seven, but nobody checks if it is actually socially intelligent.

There's been a long-running debate among female writers about creativity and motherhood. The Canadian writer Sheila Heti wrote a novel about a female author who decides against having children because it would impact her work too much. The American journalist Lauren Sandler has published an essay saying that many of the female writers she most admired – Susan Sontag, Margaret Atwood, Joan Didion – only had one child. Have you thought about this aspect of being a mother?

Not really. I didn't want to have a child until I had a child, now she's the most important thing in my life. But I do understand the concern. I find that having a child affected my own creativity because there's a certain selfishness that art requires. For so long, I had that. Pregnancy and motherhood completely switched my priorities. There is this human being that is completely dependent on me and my husband, especially on me. I breastfed her

for six months, there's a physicality for a woman to have a child that you can't diminish. You change forever, the time you have for yourself is reduced. You end up being not as creative as you could have been. You end up writing less than you would have.

How would you compare the situation of working mothers in Nigeria to the US?

In Nigeria, it's slightly easier because there's this expectation that people will help out. In Western societies, the idea of having help – even if it's paid help – feels uncomfortable to many people, others can't afford it. So the pressure is on the women, even women in ostensibly equal marriages. They are the ones who compromise more. If you're doing everything on your own, you just have to compromise on your work.

You get invited to events all over the world. Do you sometimes find it hard to be traveling so much when you could be at home, spending time with your daughter?

My daughter makes me ridiculously happy, but at the same time I pursue my own interests. Sometimes I take her with me when I travel, sometimes I don't want to take her because I want that me-time. From time to time, I just want to remind myself of that person, only in relation to myself.

A lot of women feel torn between their career and their family. They want to be 100 percent in each area and feel guilty because that's not possible.

Yeah, I have that tendency, too. There were times when I thought: Maybe I shouldn't say yes to this thing because I would be away for two nights, who knows if she is going to be okay. Of course, she is going to be okay! It's the guilt from my female socialization, from having been told that I have to put others before me all the time. Society wants to keep women in positions of caregiving. And caregiving can be beautiful, but it's not the only thing. Even I have to work through my own guilt sometimes.

What do you do in a situation like that?

I talk to myself, eat chocolate, and go running.

Last year, Adichie did a sold-out reading at Berlin's International Literature Festival. Wearing a purple jumpsuit and big bouncy hair, she was a natural authority as soon as she walked into the room. It was astonishing to see the effect she had on other women: They hugged her when taking selfies, several mothers asked her for parenting advice. "I have a son," one said. "How can I raise him to be a feminist?" Adichie laughed. "I would love to have a son," she replied. "And if I did I would teach him vulnerability. He'd get in trouble if he didn't cry about things that you cry about. And I would never ever tell him that to be strong is to be silent. Because that's terrible for men."

Adichie is one of those people who can make strangers feel like they're meeting a friend. Despite the buzz around her, she looked everyone in the eye, answering each question slowly. Speaking in Igbo, she joked with a Nigerian woman in the audience, calling her "sister." Every now and then she



stepped back to chat with her older brother Okey, who had flown in from Nigeria where he manages her annual workshop for African writers. He always accompanies her to these events, he said. Just recently, they had been to China, South Korea, and Columbia together.

I got to witness in Berlin how much women are looking up to you. What does that feel like?

It's a very good feeling! I think I have a messiah complex, I really do. When I hear from women: "I read what you wrote and it makes me feel stronger," I have such a strong emotional reaction. It's this sense that you're not alone, which is such an essential part of being human. At the same time, it's important that I don't have all the answers. I also don't pretend to have all the answers. Because that can become a burden.

You stepped into a controversy when you said that someone who has lived with the privileges of being a man before becoming a woman does not have the same experiences as someone who has always lived as a woman. Some trans women felt you were denying them their femininity.

I really believe in equality and diversity and allowing people to see who they are. At the same time, it's dishonest to say there are no differences. There were trans women who wrote to me and agreed with me. But what's going on in the American left, especially the academic left, is that you're supposed to agree with every orthodoxy. Otherwise, you don't just have a bad opinion, you're a bad person. I'm not on social media, but I'm told that some people who actually know me called me a murderer there: "Her words are violent. Her violence is killing trans women. She's a murderer!" I was just genuinely shocked and confused (*gasps*).

There seems to be a dark side to fame that you don't know about until you're famous.

There is this strange thing where people feel if you're successful you're no longer human. You give up your right to be vulnerable and worthy of compassion. I had experiences in which I realized that people see my being famous as an opportunity. People will try to use you. My ability to trust is much reduced.

Your father was kidnapped in 2015 while he was being driven from Nsukka to Abba, a two-hour journey across southeastern Nigeria. The kidnapers demanded a ransom of 10 million Nigerian naira, the equivalent of 20,000 US dollars. How did you experience these days?

It was during the first trimester of my pregnancy, I was sitting outside our house near Baltimore, feeling like crap, my husband was cooking and the food was smelling horrible to me. My brother called my husband from Nigeria, another

"I think I have a messiah complex," Adichie says. At the same time, she adds, "it's important that I don't have all the answers." Dress by Ituen Basi

brother of mine was in the US with us. When they came outside, I immediately knew that something terrible had happened. When they told me, I remember feeling suspended in utter disbelief. I just thought, "No!" I started to vomit. I wanted to take a plane and go back to Nigeria immediately, but my family said, "No, there is no point!" Everybody worried that I would miscarry. For three days I didn't sleep. It was horrible. Really, really horrible.

You later said that you felt guilty about this kidnapping.

(*Pauses*) I felt guilty, but my dad doesn't like it when I say that. "Of course, it's not your fault," he says. But he was being kidnapped because of me, the kidnapers made that very clear. They said, "Tell your daughter Chimamanda to pay the ransom." I felt really bad because if I wasn't famous this would never have happened. This thing has scarred him for the rest of his life. My dad is such a lovely man, he really doesn't want me to feel any kind of guilt. But I can't help it.

Did you find out who the kidnapers were?

We know that my father's driver was involved, he has now been in prison for several years. But the authorities have refused to say who else was involved, so we don't actually know. And, of course, we never got the ransom back. We don't want to re-traumatize our father so we don't pursue it and just let it be.

Do you sometimes worry if your parents are okay?

Not so much anymore. They moved back to our ancestral home town, Abba; they feel safe there. We're just generally more careful about who we let into our space. I also try not to think too much about that. I want to be careful, but I don't want paranoia to be my guiding principle.

The fame, the expectations, the travel – does it ever get too much for you?

There are times when I feel overwhelmed. When I really don't want to do something but think this is a really good thing because people will benefit from it. Then I'm exhausted. But it doesn't last very long and then something nice happens.

One nice thing is that by telling your own story you have put the story of many other people on the map. That's a big difference to those times when you wrote stories about blonde girls eating apples.

There are people who tell me, "Your books were the first ones I read where I could see myself in them." That makes me sad and happy. I wish it wasn't the case. But still, it makes me happy because now we have a generation who can see themselves.

Is that why you said earlier you can make a change in Nigeria? Is your annual writer's workshop a way of giving something back?

I feel a sense of responsibility, but I don't want to be the only one on the stage. I want to be part of that, but we don't have a critical mass of African writers, Nigerian writers, particularly women writers yet. There is a lot of room for a lot of them.