

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie for Harper's Bazaar
Erica Wagner

Quote from favourite woman writer:

"Rebecca West, whom I adore:

'I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat.'"

I'm not surprised when Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie tells me that her daughter -- who just turned two [she will have, at time of publication] is "a fierce little thing!" For her mother is a woman who never hesitates to speak her mind, and it is that forthrightness which has won her a global audience, first as a novelist and now -- much to her own surprise -- as a feminist icon. She burst onto the literary scene with *Purple Hibiscus*, published when she was just 26 to international acclaim; the novels that followed have cemented her reputation. *Half of a Yellow Sun*, published in 2006, won the Orange Prize and was made into a film starring Chiwetel Ejiofor and Thandie Newton. *Americanah*, published in 2013, won the National Books Critics Circle Award in the United States - - where she lives part of year, dividing her time between Baltimore, where her husband works as a physician, and her native Nigeria.

The last time she and I met, in fact, was in Lagos; I could have had no better introduction to that sprawling, vibrant city than two days with Chimamanda and her friends and family. But that was a few years ago: and while the TED talk she gave in 2012, "We should all be feminists" had already gone viral (it has now racked up millions and millions of views), there were greater things to come. The talk was sampled by Beyoncé; she found herself sitting in the front row of Dior's spring runway show in 2016, the title of her talk splashed on t-shirts worn on the catwalk; she was included on *Vanity Fair*'s International Best-Dressed List and she became the face of Boots No. 7 line of cosmetics.

It's been quite a ride; but when she speaks to me now of these recent developments its with the calm assurance that has made her the spokeswoman of a generation. Her practicality shines through. When it comes to feminism, the question for her is simply: "How do we make changes? I think for many people in the West the conversation around feminism is still quite theoretical and quite academic. There's a lot of 'social media studies feminism', I like to call it. But for me it's really about more practical things. I think for example about when Hillary Clinton was running for president. I was struck by the way in which this is something one is still expected to prove: that a woman can be president. I think feminism has failed at making obvious things obvious. And you know, the bedroom is as important as the boardroom. How women navigate relationships can also hold them back: women have been socialised to prioritize relationships, to hold out for love. I'm interested in those conversations -- I don't really read feminist theory."

Nor does she have much time for those who might argue that feminism and fashion are on opposing ends of some imaginary spectrum. She calls this idea "a sort of middle-class preoccupation". "I think it's well-meaning," she says, "on the part of people who are concerned with issues of poverty, but don't actually experience that poverty. I say this as someone who comes from a country where I know many people who are not privileged. And the idea, for example, that because people are poor they don't care about fashion or makeup -- that's is not true, it's simply not true."

Fashion and beauty, she believes, should be within the reach of everyone -- which is one of the reasons she's always loved the No. 7 brand. "Whenever I come to London, I always spend far too much time in Boots!" she laughs. "I'm always wandering around, buying things I don't need." But she was certainly surprised when she was approached to be the "face" of No. 7. "At first when they asked me, I just thought it was funny," she says. "But I love Boots. I already owned a lot of No. 7 makeup. And I also like how there is a democratic motto that No. 7 has. Which is that the

makeup is actually really good quality and it's not overpriced. The idea of a foundation that costs \$70 -- I've never quite understood that. I don't want to sound as though I don't like things that are considered sort of high-end, it's just that I like the idea of something that's good quality being something that's essentially affordable."

And she praises the brand for having foundations that suit darker skin tones -- something that's often been hard to find in the past. When she travels, she's told me, she often brings her own foundation for photoshoots and television appearances, in case a makeup artist doesn't have one to suit her, as she's found in the past. Is that getting better, I wonder? "Definitely, but I don't like to sound too optimistic," she says, "because I think that there is certainly more that can be done. But I do think there has been an improvement. And because I'm a person who's generally interested in makeup, I know the brands that recognise that there are women who are darker than Halle Berry in the world! And I know the brands that have just one shade for dark skin tones. But in general I think things are getting better, and that's one of the things I like about No. 7."

But having your words on t-shirts made by Christian Dior is distinctly high end. That relationship too, she says, came as a surprise to her. She wasn't even aware that Maria Grazia Chiuri had made history when she became the first female director of the fashion house, and she says that she felt like "an anthropologist" at the show, observing a world she'd never seen before. "I was mainly concerned with the wellbeing of the models," she says. But I tell her I'm not amazed that Chiuri was drawn to her -- this was the woman who said of her work in the industry: "If there's no message, it's just a beautiful dress."

"I think she has a unique point of view," Chimamanda says. She was surprised to learn that Dior had never had a female creative director, "because in my mind Dior has always been about and for women." Chiuri, Chimamanda discovered, "is a reader -- and she's read everything -- and we had a chat about how she had been inspired by my work and how she wanted me to come to the show. And when I met her and spoke to her there was something very genuine about her. I kind of get the sense that she loves what she's doing, but she's not bound by it. And you know it's something I read about Barack Obama that can kind of act as a parallel: that when he was running for president, I remember someone said that one of the things that they really liked about him was that while he wanted to be President, he didn't need to be President. His spirit wouldn't be wounded if he didn't win. And I get that sense with Maria Grazia. If she doesn't please the fashion mainstream, she's fine with that. She works in a way that is really true. I was drawn to that."

We Should All be Feminists has now been published as a book; as has a letter of advice written to a friend in Nigeria who was raising a daughter: *Dear Ijeawele, Or a feminist manifesto in fifteen suggestions*, is an elegant little hardback full of good sense. "Never link Chizalum's appearance with morality," she writes. Or: "Do it together. Remember in primary school we learned that a verb was a 'doing' word? Well, a father is as much a verb as a mother." When it comes to shopping for her own daughter, she's all for gender-neutral clothing; she likes the bright colours, the blues and greens, in "what we call the boy's section". But she wrote her letter to her friend Ijeawele before her own daughter was born: I wonder if having a child has changed any of her thinking. "I don't think the letter quite grasps the sense of helplessness that being a parent brings," she says softly. "I want to protect her from everything in the world -- and at the same time, I know I can't. I have to be careful that she doesn't feel bad about her hair or about her skin colour. I want to make sure that she thinks of her body as something very important and not something that you just look at in a mirror. So I am happy to inform you that at two years old she is very good at playing football!"

She likes to keep her private life private: social media, she says, "just isn't a good fit for me". But she is strongly politically engaged, and tells me how much it meant to her take part in the Women's March in Washington last January, the protest which arose in resistance to the election of Donald Trump. "I loved being there. I knew, of course, that it was not going to solve anything on the day. But it felt necessary. It was just after the Inauguration -- the Muslim ban hadn't happened yet, all sorts of things hadn't happened yet -- but you felt that the United States in that moment was aware that something was not right. As a symbol of resistance I felt it was important."

These are strange times. “I’m not generally optimistic about the world,” she says, citing the apocalyptic sense one can get from reading the news. But it’s hard not to be inspired when you’re in conversation with her. “How do we make changes?” she asks more than once in the course of our conversation. She knows that’s a question for all of us.

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