

Chimamanda's Bag of Fucks is Empty

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is deeply and unapologetically Nigerian. You get reminded of it when she laughs and her whole shoulders shake. When she speaks Igbo in that fast, accentuated clip you never look far for the Nigerian in her; it's there, as apparent as the fabric on her neck. When she tells Ebuka Uchendu in a sprawling Bounce Radio Live interview that might as well have taken place elsewhere—not in this soundproofed room with a table (books on her side, presumably hers, somewhat worn-in) and a screen far up glowing with her face—that she made up her name, you can see the Nigeria in the way she holds up her mouth with the slight pleasure of long-held revelation.

The interview starts off with a bang. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—look at that natural roll—was not born *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*. You have to repeat it to get it. Chimamanda, Ngozi, Adichie, was not born with that name. She was born slightly more ordinary, “Ngozi Adichie”, not a fully made star like Achebe introduced her. It is this startling ordinariness that is the soul of a conversation so rich you wonder why there aren't creepers hanging off the table by the end. Her ordinariness is the thematic soot of this ride, the engine that chugs at the back and moves the cutlery a certain way. Going from the ordinary to the extraordinary is a journey that started with so much as a simple name.

Hear the story yourself:

“Just before my novel was published, I remember thinking, and I remember exactly where I was when it came to me. I am not a person who is given to this kind of Pentecostal talk, but it felt like a revelation. I was in my brother’s house in England, in the tiny guest room, lying on the narrow bed. My novel was going to be published and I did not want to be introduced to the world as Amanda. I wanted an Igbo name but I didn’t want Ngozi. I didn’t feel like Ngozi – Ngozi is a lovely name, but it is too common and it didn’t feel like me. I remember just lying there and it came to me. “Chimamanda”. Obviously, I could have just picked any Igbo name, but I wanted a name that had Amanda in it, so that I wouldn’t have to change my passport because I already had the identity. I had a passport, a driver’s license and bank accounts with that name.

“So it was really just me thinking, how can I hold onto this name, but then make it Igbo?”

“The reason I didn’t want to talk about it – because I have actually decided to write about it – is because I wanted to give it time to have its own legitimacy. Had I started talking about it earlier, it would have been so easy to dismiss. In some ways, it feels legitimate now because half of the kids born in Igboland are being named Chimamanda. Whoever says we can’t change culture?”

From changing her name, revitalizing the Igbo culture to making global impact, Chimamanda has always looked out to fix things, to reset the old and suboptimal, like a Grandma reaching out to adjust an ever wonky radio. If it could be better and if there is the possibility that it be adjusted, then why not? There is too much that is broken with this world, too much out of tune. This mindset has ultimately taken her into destiny. She was supposed to be a doctor (naturally, all Nigerian kids who happen to have good grades have been preordained by God to hang a stethoscope around their necks or put on flowing robes in a court of justice—God forbid they like to arrange flowers) and then she was not. Briefly, she switched to pharmacy but decided it was not working, either, not because she was failing—mind you—but because she wanted to be in control of her own destiny and didn’t feel comfortable with her options. So she pushed and was suddenly in Philadelphia, USA, having fallen through one of the doors she had pushed at will.

Adichie has always desired to destine things and this interview is no different. It is not a scoop or a rumour from some shady Instagram gossip page. It is preconceived, precisely shaped like a teardrop pendant—a *Chimamanda*. Like the scholarships. Like *Americanah*. Like the silence around her personals, Adichie is fully in control, ordering what she wants into where she desires. And what she wanted was for us. This conversation was meant for Nigeria. Not for *Vanity Fair*, not for *The New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* or for her friends at NPR. Not for the middle pages of some random *Gossip!* magazine. This one was for Nigeria and Ebuka Uchendu. She chose that it be this long. She chose to really talk. She chose to reveal a little about her husband in the same way she decided wardrobe choice, an intentional “Omekannia” across it to tell us who she is.

In a way, however, Chimamanda is also unlike us, unlike the stifling mediocrity that plagues our institutions, unlike a country that waits for God to govern it. She is very deliberate, given to planning, preparation and predetermination. Chimamanda demands the same thing of you. Without that intentionality from us all, it becomes so much more difficult for her, a being of choices, to functionally exist in the public space. She puts that choice into your hands and presses it warmly, asking you to just not please use a picture if her daughter is in the frame. She even goes on further to give you justification for making that choice. She is ready to do the intellectual digging if we are

going to be making the choices ourselves. And that has been the soul of her public intellectual life. *Dear Ijeawele, We Should All Be Feminists, The Danger of a Single Story*—an oeuvre of thoughtful essays and a hundred imploring speeches. Adichie is here to show us the possibilities of what can be if we so choose it to be. She lives it, writes it, speaks it. She's always showing us. In her choices. In her decision to not go as a "Mrs," to show us that marriage need not be the end of how a woman exists. In a way, she perfectly embodies the concept of choice: how consent makes everything even more beautiful. Interviews. Relationships. Governance. Sex. Which is why this interview comes out fully made, driven by intentionality, better than anything you are planning to watch this weekend, better than NTA and the banal noise of government-regulated news.

Chimamanda also demands that you do not lie, too. In your choices, it is baffling to make harmful ones for yourself and most especially for others. How can you go and lie? How can you intentionally choose to harm the image of a person, especially with lies? *That's a lie, nau. How can you lie?*

About 41 minutes into the interview, Chimamanda talks about a maliciousness that comes with fame. How you swell into an opportunity to be taken advantage of. It comes with the business and Adichie would not mind it except for those who go out on a limb and lie. She made the choice before to ignore and now she is making the choice to engage. It is not a joke. This year, she will be buying back shares of her own public narrative with the help of five lawyers who'll sue anyone who need not lie about a goddamn thing of hers.

When Adichie says this, when Adichie makes resolute statements about her decisions, especially against a problem long ignored or knotty, she has a sweet smile on her face. It's to say that it's done. This is what I will do and that's that about that. And why not? She's thought through it and now there's nothing left but the hard gleam of finality. In those specific moments through the interview, she comes across like her father's daughter, an archetype, fully grown and into her own, making decisions for herself and her family, confident, resolute, telling the umunna where to direct themselves, which palm trees to tie the goats to, where the funeral is taking place, whose land is here and whose land ends there.

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2020 was a really rough year. Within months, a lot was taken from us. Things that have always been there, that have directed us, given us a sense of purpose. Now we do not know how to conduct ourselves. Our journey feels pointless without the weight of love on our backs. What does it mean to carry on in these circumstances? These are the questions we have to ask ourselves. These are the questions Adichie has had to contemplate herself.

Ngozi Adichie lost her father halfway through 2020. There wasn't much in the way of a warning. He was here and then he was gone. Professor James Nwoye Adichie was gone from the center of her life. There was a scattering. She gathered bits of her grief and wore them in brightly-coloured shirts. It seems primitive but there is nothing sophisticated to be grabbed at in death. We must comfort ourselves; we must put arms around each other. We must writhe; we must shove the crawling worms of loss, the destitute emptiness. We must walk in vast valleys of grief and weep into the mud. We must wake up for nights and wonder what has happened, what has disappeared, what is so empty. We must sit in the front of our computer and type; we must sit in front of the computer and type nothing at all. And then, above all, we must not sink.

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There is a strength to be had in loss, a clarity about the self. That bag of fucks suddenly feels heavy. We must throw each one out and feel light again. Chimamanda has no more fucks to give. She is

doing this her way. She is realizing that all these will nevertheless continue and there's nothing sensible about leaving much behind that is not in her own shape or voice. 2020 brought mortality so gruesomely closer. She could be gone tomorrow. This is the same spirit behind #EndSars. We must come together to try now, anyways. Speak out, now. Rage, if we will. There is no going easy into that gentle night. We must sit in front of the government house and raise our voices. We must write without shackles in the loudest places. We must protest, cry, and fight back. This year won't claim us all.

There is no looking at Chimamanda in the eyes and not seeing us. 43, married, an *omekannia*: when she tells the story of her husband as an extra at a Star Wars shoot, gesticulating and reliving the experience with all of herself, she is just utterly Nigerian. Adichie comes out with no apologies. She is never not going to be us, never going to present herself as anything other than us. This is who we are and this is who she is. Brilliant. Unapologetic. Resilient. Proud. By being herself, she has become us. By forging herself a new name, Chimamanda shows that we can change not just our culture but also our destiny.

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