

A left that's divided against itself cannot stand

The left are villainising fellow left-wing figures for single misgivings and allowing their other progressive works to be cast aside

By [Chloe Kent](#), Film and TV Editor (2016/17)

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Image: BBC World Service

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is arguably one of the most influential figureheads of contemporary feminism. Her work has entered the realms of popular and intellectual discourse, from being sampled in a Beyoncé song and being the face of a No. 7 campaign, to a string of critically acclaimed and award winning novels to her name. The sweetheart of the third wave.

Until recently. Adichie has made some comments which were deemed somewhat questionable. In an interview on Channel 4, Adichie was asked: "if you're a trans woman who grew up identifying as a man, who grew up enjoying the privileges of being a man, does this take away from becoming a woman?" She replied: "it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning as a woman and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are." She then went on to clarify, in a series of statements, that this did not mean she thought the male privilege she perceived in any way made up for the experience of gender dysphoria, in terms of quality of life. She was merely stating that trans women would not have the same life experience as cis women, and that coming with said difference would be an experience of a degree of male privilege prior to transition, when being read as and thus treated as male by society at large.

Adichie's clarifications about the admittedly heavy-handed delivery of her original statement failed to abate critics. Many would only accept a full retraction of her comments and an obedient side-step back

into the hive mind. Because that's what modern leftist discourse has become: a hive mind. It doesn't matter what your contributions have been up until you say something deemed problematic. As soon as the words have slipped from your lips, no amount of inspirational TED talks or literary accreditations will save you. I'm not seeking to open a conversation on Adichie's comments. I don't think they're the most outrageous thing anyone's ever said – she didn't take the opportunity to go full Germaine Greer and say trans women aren't women at all. I actually think she raises a reasonable point in saying trans and cis women will experience womanhood in different ways, but that these differences devalue neither.

Still, I sympathise wholeheartedly with how a transgender woman could be affronted by these comments. To struggle with gender dysphoria, and be told the experience has, in a way, afforded you certain privileges, I imagine comes as a slap in the face. What I really wish to focus on is the reaction to them. Because the takedown in the Twittersphere was one of the most brutal I have witnessed in a long while. Adichie was labelled a TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist). Some left post-it notes on Americanah, perhaps one of the most important artworks concerning black womanhood in recent years, hashtagged [#transwomenarewomen](#). This serves to completely derail the text. It implies Adichie's comments made her novel and all it stands for entirely invalid.

I find this completely distasteful. Adichie has made some of the most powerful contributions to 21st century feminist and postcolonial debate I can think of. The idea that, because she has made a singular disagreeable statement, she is invalid as a political contributor is as destructive as it is unreasonable. Time and time again, public figures who stick a toe out of line are thrown under the bus, discredited, their admirers left heartbroken that their idol's worldview isn't a mirror image of their own. It's hugely reactionary, and turns what could have been an opportunity to open an important conversation into a witch hunt.

It's become an unfortunate but recurrent tendency within the left, to turn ideological disagreements into assassination of character. This doesn't mean people shouldn't be calling out those they feel are in the wrong – in no way do I implore you to shut down debate. But the belief that one perceived wrong undoes all rights is immature. People are multifaceted, and Adichie's remark doesn't undo everything she's achieved until now, nor should it be allowed to mar her future successes. We are allowing small, semantic disagreements to divide us. There is no room to learn. There is no humour, instead a feeling that one must tread on eggshells for fear of being ideologically attacked. Meanwhile, the right point and laugh as we dismantle ourselves for them.



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