

Merriam Webster's definition of the word feminism is the belief that men and women should have equal rights and opportunities. Despite the relentless and progressive efforts of the feminist movement, many women are still fighting for equality today. The substantial influence of pop culture on feminism and society as a whole cannot be ignored. Singer Beyonce took advantage of the ever growing digital space and released her latest, self-titled album straight to iTunes last December (the hard copy CD was released a few weeks later). Ironically, *Beyonce* was released on Friday the 13th (complete with accompanying music videos for every track on the album). Her first week's record sales, 617,000 US downloads in its first week of release, were anything but unlucky (Caulfield, Keith. "Beyonce Leads for Third Week At No 1 On Billboard Chart" Billboard.com). The entire album is Beyonce like we've never quite heard or seen her before. She's in your face sexy and at times downright vulgar. The most poignant example of the latter is a bonus track called "Flawless", which features acclaimed Nigerian author and feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. However, Chimamanda was not actually in the studio recording "Flawless" with Beyonce. The second verse is all Miss Adichie. The mixing of the track and the speech together sounds, as Beyonce would say, quite flawless. Chimamanda Adichie's section is actually a collection of verbatim snippets from her TEDx Talk, "We Should All Be Feminists", delivered in April 2013, addressing feminism and its misconceptions. The song also features an old audio clip from an episode of *Star Search*, in which Girls Tyme (a precursor to Beyonce's former group, Destiny's Child) competed and lost. The snippets of the *Star Search* TV show and most importantly the speech from Chimamanda highlight remix culture and the integration of educational or nonmusical elements within pop culture.

Beyonce's song "Flawless" was originally titled "Bow Down" (the latter title is actually more befitting of its content) and features the harsh lyrics "Don't forget/Respect that/Bow down bitches/H-Town vicious". This isn't quite the message that Miss Adichie originally gave during her TEDx Talk. Although Beyonce's song has undoubtedly introduced her to a new audience, Chimamanda was a prominent figure well before "Flawless" was ever thought of. She's the author of three novels, including *Purple Hibiscus* (winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (winner of the Orange Prize, a prestigious UK award for woman authored fiction), and her latest novel *Americanah*, which has already received strong reviews since its release last summer. She was even named one of Time's 100 Most Influential People in 2012 (Sneed, Tierney "Meet The Feminist Writer Beyonce Samples On Her New Album" USNews.com). She uses the title feminist boldly and does not understand why people in today's society often refer to it in such a negative context. She embraces feminism and equality for women with full force. Although the song gives credit to Chimamanda and her speech, there has been no word on what her opinion of Beyonce's use of her speech is.

The music industry specifically has thrown out a lot of backlash for those participants and users of the remix culture; yet many musicians, including Beyonce, are taking part in this phenomenon. Remixing involves taking a piece of another culture, song, movie, speech, etc and incorporating it in with a song. Many artists see this as copyright infringement of their work (if not used by permission), despite the exposure that the remixed version of their work may bring them. However, to their defense, who wants to miss out on any potential earnings of a successful song? In relation to Beyonce's "Flawless", the question isn't one of copyright infringement, but of faulty interpretation (being a strong, feminist

woman vs. telling “bitches” to bow down). Chimamanda Adichie has the entire second verse of the song. If it were not for hearing “Flawless”, I possibly would have missed the opportunity to witness Chimamanda Adichie’s engaging TEDx Talk. As others also probably were after listening to Chimamanda’s verse in the song, I was curious to research its origin and full context. After hearing Miss Adichie’s TEDx Talk, could Beyonce’s example of remixed or altered pop culture present a flawed (pun intended) view of feminism, or at the very least one that Chimamanda (and other feminists) never intended?

“Flawless” is not Beyonce’s first attempt at standing up for women’s equality. As the lead singer of Destiny’s Child, she involuntarily became a role model for young women with songs like “Independent Women” and “Survivor”. The difference between those songs and “Flawless” is that they had much more crossover appeal to the masses. Beyonce may have pushed the envelope in some of her earlier works, but she rips it wide open with “Flawless”. At its core, the song is actually very narcissistic. Despite the brief moment of feminist substance that is the excerpt from Chimamanda Adichie’s TEDx Talk, the rest of the lyrics highlight Beyonce talking about how awesome she is (“Momma taught me good home training/My Daddy taught me how to love my haters/My sister told me to speak my mind/My man makes me feel so God damn fine/I’m flawless!”). The song comes off as more of an angry, militant warning to those aforementioned “haters” and a desperate attempt to prove a point by any means necessary. Would those same young women who once looked up to Beyonce as a symbol of female empowerment be able to do the same after listening to “Flawless”?

Although Beyonce credits herself for “waking up like this...Flawless” in the song, she also gives power to her husband (rapper Jay Z) for, in her own words, making her feel “so God damn fine”. She even references her wedding ring in the song, when she sings, “My rock....Flawless.” Based on Chimamanda’s “We Should All Be Feminists” TEDx Talk, she would more than likely cringe at the thought of this concept. She gives credence to the idea of marriage, but asks why women are raised in society to aspire to marriage, while men are not. She also gives a personal anecdote about a woman she knows that sold her house, as not to intimidate whoever her potential husband may be. She then mentions another woman she knows that wears a wedding ring to conferences, so that the other attending participants will respect her more (Adichie, Chimamanda “We Should All Be Feminists” YouTube.com).

Interestingly enough, Chimamanda is married herself, but will only answer to Miss Adichie, not Mrs. Esegba. She claims she is happily married but the concept of using a husband’s surname is more specific to Western culture, not in Nigeria (Filani, Omotola “Don’t Address Me As Mrs, But Miss” - Married Chimamanda Warns Journalist” DailyPost.ng). Beyonce proves Miss Adichie’s point, naming her last headlining tour “Mrs. Carter” and is frequently referenced as Beyonce Knowles Carter. Beyonce’s praise to her husband in “Flawless” reads as a simple compliment on the surface. Once we peer beneath that exoskeleton, there is a subliminal message that perhaps her self-worth lies in the palm of her husband’s hands. This contradicts the strong, independent, beautiful woman persona she displays throughout the majority of the song.

Wardrobe and the idea of masculinity for females also play a large role in feminism. The wardrobe displayed in the music video for “Flawless” is revealing (short shorts, with only fishnet underwear and

torn denim fabric in the back), yet masculine and conservative (a buttoned up to the neck flannel shirt and black combat boots with silver chains). Everyone in the music video is wearing a variation of the same type of clothing. The clothes worn in the “Flawless” clip are a drastic difference from the skirts, heels, cropped tops and dresses Beyonce usually wears. Even Chimamanda admits her struggle with deciding on what to wear for a speaking engagement, much like her TEDx Talk that Beyonce sampled from. She decided on what she deems as a “very ugly, manly suit” that she only wore to appear in control to her audience, at a past speaking engagement. She also stated that the male wardrobe is the standard for what to wear that appears powerful. As Miss Adichie explains, women have to worry about what they wear and how it will increase or diminish their respect level from others. Interestingly enough, her outfit was feminine, but also had elements of masculinity. She wore her braided hair tied into a bun, moderately sized gold bob earrings, a brown and gold patterned shirt, burgundy form fitting pants and knee high brown leather boots. Through both Beyonce and Chimamanda’s attire, perhaps they are hinting at the notion that the world still may not be ready for absolute femininity; and that feminism is more acceptable with a hint of masculinity.

Perhaps Josie Cunningham could have taken a page from Chimamanda’s (or even Beyonce’s) wardrobe handbook when it comes to matters of body image. As reported on *The F Word*, a popular UK based blog rooted in the concept of feminism, Josie is a single mother and aspiring model that has been willing to stop at nothing to rise to the top of the model ranks. She received breast augmentation, with assistance from the NHS, based on the grounds of her suffering from serious mental health issues because of her chest size. But her story gets worse before it even attempts to get better. Cunningham’s modeling career still did not take off the way she wanted it to and that disappointment eventually led her to work as an escort (until she got pregnant). Now she is selling phone sex (Kokoli, Alexandra “From Public Services To Public Women: A Morality Tale for the Age of Austerity” *TheFWord.org*). Women are plagued with the pressure of being sexy and provocative; standards that are traditionally set by men.

Chimamanda Adichie makes a noteworthy point about women and their bottom power in her TEDx Talk. Her meaning of bottom power reflects the idea that women have an inclination and advantage to tap into a higher power (controlled by men) to get what they want. If this concept really holds to be true, then Josie used her bottom power to persuade the NHS for her reasoning to receive breast implants. Ironically, she became no more powerful by what she had done. In fact, she became less powerful and what some may consider to be stripped of her dignity by her own submission. She even has been the target of slanderous remarks on social media sites. Ryan Oddy tweeted on March 27, 2013 that “After all the tax I’ve paid in my life, I feel like #JosieCunningham owes me a titw**k”. She later confessed “I was never depressed about my flat chest and wasn't teased at school about it (as she had argued to health professionals). I just got emotional when I was explaining to my GP that I felt I couldn't live a full life the way I was -- and he agreed to refer me for implant surgery. (Kokoli *TheFWord.com*).

Bell Hooks directly addresses the need for women like Josie Cunningham to cater to anti-feminist, pro sexist male standards in her book *Feminism Is For Everybody*. She argues, “Girls today are often just as self-hating when it comes to their bodies as their pre-feminist counterparts were. While feminist movement produced many types of pro-female magazines, no feminist oriented fashion magazine appeared to offer all females alternative visions of beauty (35).” She offers the challenge that as long as

we lack alternatives against unhealthy or unrealistic glorification of female image, we will never change that mindset. For instance, Bell Hooks believes that women need their own TV network that caters directly to feminist subject matter (exclusive from female centered subject matter). Would Beyoncé's "Flawless" music video clip be featured in rotation on such a network? The fact that it even has to be questioned could raise an eyebrow with feminist supporters. Bell Hooks speaks about how women have to conquer the internal struggle within themselves and each other before fighting against inequality. Telling bitches to bow down is hardly a cohesive statement. There would be far less chance for opposition of including Chimamanda Adichie's TEDx Talk over Beyoncé's "Flawless" video, despite the featured snippets from Chimamanda's speech.

Beyoncé teeters on a thin line of promoting feminism (primarily by using Chimamanda Adichie's speech snippets) and appealing to what active participants and listeners of pop culture innately seem to gravitate to: shock value. "Flawless" is that guilty pleasure song that you love to hate and hate to love. On one hand, it separates women (and whoever else she's referring to) by aggressively calling some of them bitches. Ironically, the song cuts the deepest with its opening line, "I know when you were little girls/You dreamt of being in my world". It's not clear whether or not she's talking about the little girls who buy her music (let's hope not) or her female peers in the music industry who she feels may try to emulate her. Instead of going the traditional route with pop music that remixes or samples snippets of audio footage from years prior, Beyoncé opted to choose a very current audio clip (Chimamanda gave her speech just months before Beyoncé's album was released). Also, it's not just a clip from an interview or posthumous recording taken from another artist, but it holds intellectual and educational value. Although Miss Adichie was already an established author, her feature on Beyoncé's song brings awareness to a brand new pop culture audience (that is used to intellectual information being fed to them, not sought after with social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook). In a twisted method of doing so, Beyoncé could possibly be supporting the bond between another African American woman and her stance for equality. As Bell Hooks explains in *Feminism is for Everyone*, this is something that would have been nearly impossible to achieve at the onset of feminism (13-18). White elitist women were given credit for starting the feminist movement, while Black women (and women of color in general and third world countries) and radical White women were considered mere followers, lacking substantial contributions.

In regards to race and the role it plays in feminism, Chimamanda Adichie thinks that the concept of feminism itself (she believes in the feminist idea, not a movement) at times excluded the importance of race and the inequalities Black women faced to have their voices heard. She makes it clear that she is more interested in social feminism, rather than academic feminism (including its origins, evolution, etc). She also thinks that the most admired feminists are the market traders that she has come to know in Nigeria (much like the blue collar female workers that Bell Hooks speaks of in *Feminism Is For Everyone*). These women are the bread winners for their families, but they cater to the egos of their husbands as not to bruise them. She goes on to mention that in Nigeria, she may be called out as a prostitute because she drives a luxury car (Gray, Emma "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on The TEDx Talk Beyoncé Sampled And Why We Should Forget Feminism's 'Baggage'" HuffingtonPost.com). There is an innate sense that society still equates certain levels of success with men and that women must have obtained it

in an illegal or unsavory way. Perhaps these are the bitches Beyonce is speaking of; those who question the validity of her success.

Another interesting element of “Flawless” that’s worth noting is its inclusion of the Star Search footage from Beyonce’s former group, Girls Tyme. Her group did not win. In fact they lost to an all-male group. The song itself is sandwiched between the old footage of the announcement of Girls Tyme preparing to perform on Star Search and the somber news of their defeat. The meat of “Flawless” boasts a proud “look at me now” aura that contradicts the Star Search closer. Will Beyonce’s “Flawless” be viewed as a paramount example of feminism 20 years from now? I don’t believe that will be the case. But will the Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie TEDx Talk sample that’s featured in the song, bring awareness to the feminist struggle? I would have to say absolutely yes. The *Beyonce* album has already sold millions of copies and a massive amount of people are now exposed to an intellectual perspective of feminism that they may not have been otherwise. If Miss Adichie is the delectable entree that pleases our pallet for feminist knowledge, then Mrs. Carter should at least be credited as the fork that provides us with easier access to the meal.