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# The Private Lives of Dreams: Exploring Feminist Interiority in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count*

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**Abstract**

This paper examines *Dream Count* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as a significant turn toward interiority, affect, and feminist self-interrogation in contemporary African literature. Departing from the overt historical and political engagements that characterize much of Adichie's earlier fiction, *Dream Count* foregrounds female desire, emotional memory, and transnational subjectivity through a fragmented narrative structure shaped by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The novel presents the interwoven narratives of Chiamaka, Zikora, Omelogor, and Kadiatou, whose experiences of lockdown, displacement, and restricted mobility between Nigeria and Maryland intensify their engagement with dreams, memories, and subconscious reflection.

The paper argues that dreams in *Dream Count* function not merely as symbolic episodes but as narrative forces that structure the characters' fragmented identities. Through imagination and unconscious desire, dreams blur the boundary between waking life and inner experience, revealing identity as unstable, layered, and continuously negotiated. The pandemic destabilizes traditional understandings of selfhood by interrupting routines, relationships, and transnational movement, compelling the characters to confront questions of intimacy, fulfilment, and belonging. Situated within feminist theoretical frameworks articulated by Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Sara Ahmed, the paper explores how Adichie interrogates the politics of intimacy, silence, and selfhood. *Dream Count* presents identity as flux, shaped by experience, memory, and the subconscious, challenging static notions of the self in a time of global crisis.

**Keywords:** Dream, Fragmentation, Identity, Narrative, Memory

## Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Dream Count* occupies a distinctive position within her literary contributions and within contemporary feminist and postcolonial fiction. While Adichie's earlier novels *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), and *Americanah* (2013) have been widely examined for their engagement with nationalism, history, race, and global modernity, *Dream Count* signals a decisive aesthetic and ethical shift. The novel retreats from overt historical spectacle and public trauma toward the intimate, affective, and psychologically textured landscapes of women's lives. This inward turn does not mark a withdrawal from politics; rather, it constitutes a reorientation of the political itself from collective upheaval to the quieter violences of expectation, intimacy, and emotional regulation.

This paper argues that *Dream Count* represents Adichie's most sustained engagement with feminist interiority, understood not merely as private consciousness but as a site where power, normativity, and social discipline are internalised and negotiated. Through fragmented narrative structure, recursive memory, and a sustained focus on desire and disappointment, the novel interrogates how women come to understand themselves within patriarchal, neoliberal, and postcolonial regimes of value. The act of "counting dreams" becomes both a metaphor and a method: a way of measuring a life against what it was expected to become, and a critique of the cultural scripts that govern female fulfilment.

## Dreams, Interiority, and Narrative Fragmentation

Dreams hold an important position in human life. They are symbolic, psychological, and narrative tools that contribute to the formation of individual identities, serving as gateways to the subconscious mind. *Dream Count* examines the role of dreams in the construction of narrative meaning. In the novel, dreams are not merely symbolic episodes to be interpreted; rather, they blur the boundaries between dream and waking life, particularly under the conditions of isolation and psychological strain induced by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Unlike the epic historical canvas of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Dream Count* resists the consolations of collective meaning. Its women are not emblematic figures of national struggle; they are individuals whose crises are often illegible within dominant narratives of success. This shift aligns the novel with contemporary feminist theory that challenges the privileging of visibility, action, and progress, arguing instead for attention to affect, vulnerability, and ambivalence (Butler; Ahmed). The novel thus invites a reading that situates it at the intersection of feminist philosophy, affect theory, and postcolonial critique.

Critical responses to Adichie's fiction have largely focused on three interrelated concerns: nationalism and history, diaspora and race, and feminist intervention. While *Half of a Yellow Sun* has generated extensive scholarship on Biafran memory and historiography, and *Americanah* has been widely read through the lenses of transnationalism and racial formation, *Dream Count* complicates this critical trajectory. The novel foregrounds emotional states—longing, regret, fatigue, muted anger—that resist clear political articulation, thereby creating a critical gap where significance lies not in representation but in affective reorientation.

**Pandemic, Memory, and the Blurring of Reality**

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled individuals worldwide to reconsider how life is structured, experienced, and narrated, not only in social and economic terms but also in psychological and existential ones. Experts associated with the Center for Science and Society at Columbia University noted that the pandemic introduced uncertainty, disrupted social norms, and exposed public health inequalities, raising questions about whether societies would revert to pre-pandemic normalcy. These conditions resonate deeply with the affective landscape of *Dream Count*.

The novel suggests that dreams possess their own form of reality. Emotional truths revealed in dreams—anxiety, longing, unresolved conflict—persist into waking consciousness and shape self-perception. Dreams thus become a mode of knowing rather than objects of interpretation. One of the novel's most striking features is its refusal of grand narrative. Instead of anchoring itself in a singular historical or political event, *Dream Count* unfolds through remembered relationships, unfinished conversations, and emotional afterlives, reflecting a feminist critique of historiography.

Chiamaka, the narrator, dreams of hugging her mother in her childhood home in Enugu, an experience that surprises her precisely because it arises unbidden (Adichie 3). During lockdown, her Zoom calls with family become a "mélange of hallucinatory images" (Adichie 9), as formless days "bleed into one another" (Adichie 5). In one instance, a loud bang during a call with her brother Afam leaves her unsure whether the sound originates from the screen or from outside her window (Adichie 7), demonstrating the literal blurring of physical and digital realities.

**Desire, Performance, and Feminist Theory**

In order to escape the isolation of lockdown, Chiamaka retreats into imagined lives, revisiting past relationships and unrealised possibilities. These imagined scenarios—often set in cities like New York or Paris—reflect not personal preference

but culturally sanctioned fantasies of fulfilment (Adichie 13). Desire in *Dream Count* is deeply entangled with memory, and this repetition mirrors Judith Butler's account of performativity as citational, wherein desire is rehearsed through familiar yet unsatisfying patterns.

Femininity in the novel emerges as a series of repeated emotional acts—patience, accommodation, endurance—performed at significant emotional cost. This aligns with Butler's theory of gender as performative practice (*Gender Trouble*). Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality further illuminates the persistence of unfulfilling relationships, revealing how relational norms are internalised and sustained despite dissatisfaction.

Sara Ahmed's theorisation of affective economies is central to understanding the novel's treatment of unhappiness. Dissatisfaction in *Dream Count* functions not as pathology but as insight, challenging normative happiness scripts (*The Promise of Happiness*). Memory operates as an affective archive, shaping present orientations and ethical self-understanding.

**Silence, Subalternity, and Ethical Limits**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of voice and representation offers a crucial framework for reading silence in *Dream Count*. Characters such as Kadiatou, whose experiences are shaped by gendered violence and migration, exemplify how subaltern subjectivity persists even when public speech is constrained. Rather than claiming transparent access to subaltern experience, the novel attends to the limits of representation, aligning with Spivak's insistence on ethical attentiveness.

**Conclusion**

This paper has argued that *Dream Count* represents a significant ethical and aesthetic intervention in contemporary feminist fiction. Departing from historical epic and nationalist allegory, the novel relocates feminist politics within the terrain of interiority, affect, and ethical self-reckoning. By centring women whose lives are outwardly legible yet inwardly unsettled, Adichie challenges celebratory narratives of empowerment and offers instead a sustained examination of constraint. In doing so, *Dream Count* aligns with feminist theoretical traditions that prioritise attentiveness over prescriptive solutions.

**Works Cited**

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