

**A feminist perspective on motherhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
“Zikora”**

*Uma perspectiva feminista sobre a maternidade em “Zikora” de Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie*

Bruna Alessandra Kindinger¹

Abstract: Considering that humanity transcends its nature, the present article aims to analyze which are (or might be) some of the cultural implications for motherhood and, even further, how they manipulate women's experiences towards this practice. In order to accomplish this objective, the short story “Zikora” (2020), written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an important figure to contemporary Nigerian literature as well as to feminism itself, was investigated through feminist lens regarding this perspective. The conclusive insights of this discussion demonstrate the existence of social mechanisms that inhibited the protagonist from achieving a concrete experience in her process of becoming a mother.

Keywords: Zikora; Feminism; Motherhood.

Resumo: Considerando que a humanidade ultrapassa sua natureza, o presente artigo busca analisar quais são (ou quais poderiam ser) as implicações culturais para a maternidade e, ainda mais, como elas manipulam as experiências femininas nessa prática. Visando atingir tal objetivo, o conto “Zikora” (2020), escrito por Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, uma importante figura para a literatura nigeriana contemporânea, bem como para o próprio feminismo, foi investigado através de um viés feminista sobre esse assunto. As considerações finais desta discussão demonstram a existência de mecanismos sociais que inibem a protagonista de atingir uma experiência concreta no seu processo de tornar-se mãe.

Palavras-chave: Zikora; Feminismo; Maternidade.

¹ Mestrado em Letras pela Universidade Federal do Paraná, UFPR, Brasil. Email: alekindinger@gmail.com.
Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1927-1275>

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a contemporary Nigerian author who is worldwide recognized not only for her literary production but also for her activism in relevant topics such as gender and race. Throughout her writing, it is possible to identify her effort to dismantle what she calls “the dangers of a single story” (Adichie, 2009), which are the biased views propagated by the dominant narratives. In a general way, her preoccupation, along with the aesthetics of her fiction, is directed to elements involving both postcolonial and postmodern experiences, making her occupy an important position inside the Nigerian’s Third Generation of Writers (Adesanmi; Dunton, 2005). The acknowledgment of Adichie’s influence in the literary field is equally significant inside academia², where the complexity of her themes has driven the attention of many researchers. The present study, as expected, is part of this dynamic. By being instigated the contrast regarding the experiences on motherhood between the protagonist of “Zikora” (2020) and her mother, I aim to analyze the newest short story written by Adichie through feminist lens on this subject.

The usage of this approach seems especially interesting since the author is known for her feminist posture. As an example, I cite her popular speech “We Should All Be Feminists” (2013), published by TEDx Talks on YouTube, in which she explains the reasons that led her into becoming “a happy African feminist” and the implications of this ‘label’ in her life – not only personally, but professionally as well. In the face of persistent injustices that remain ignored because of some cultural assumptions that ascribe women as inferior because of their nature, Adichie proposes a review of these values towards a new consciousness that eliminates these gender expectations – “Boys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates the differences and then it becomes a self-fulfilling process” (Adichie, 2013, n. p.). One way of starting these changes, according to her, is trying to identify these discrepancies, especially those which are considered ordinary, and confront them through a reflexive attitude that legitimizes equal rights in society. Therefore, being a feminist should not be a political fight restricted for women but instead a recognizable cause that unites people despite their gender. “More of us should reclaim that word [feminist]. My

² See the section about “Bibliography” in “The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website”. This is a domain maintained by Daria Tunca where she indicates many works that have been produced about Adichie’s literature.

own definition of feminist is a feminist is a man or a woman who says ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it. We must do better’” (Adichie, 2013, n. p.).

In regard of the selected work to be here investigated, it is possible to detect this confrontation of expectations in the way Zikora, the main character, deals with her pregnancy. Switching from present to past, the narrative shows which were the events that guided the protagonist until the birth of her son. During these moments, it is visible how the unexpected abandonment from Kwame, the father of the child, impacted her emotionally, but also the suffering she feels from her mother’s judgment at her struggles into this process. In this sense, my focus relies on the divergence between these two feminine characters and their beliefs about how women should handle the difficulties that (might) be part of their lives; more specifically into motherhood. By conciliating feminist theories to this exercise, I expect to elucidate some of the conservative behaviors that subjugate Zikora into a conflict state between her feelings and her own identity.

Thus, to begin the referred discussion and establish some of the comprehensions that I assume for the current exercise of analysis, the following section of this article briefly brings in considerations about the involvement amid feminism and literature. There, the objective is to ponder the essences of this revolutionary movement along with the circumstances in which literary works contribute to its purpose. Afterward, it is going to be presented the investigation of the already mentioned short story in accordance with feminist theories that underpin arguments for the selected passages. To conclude, the main elements of this research are going to be highlighted in order to demonstrate the contributions of this paper and to provide its final insights.

1 Literature and feminism

For many years women’s desires, experiences and knowledge have been neglected. It is not difficult to notice, when observing history, the obliteration of female theories and creations (scientifically, technologically, artistically) in relation to the remarkable empire of those produced by men. On behalf of feminism, however, this scenario has been positively transformed, allowing women to express and emancipate themselves in front of the (not always) slight control mechanisms established by the cultural patriarchy.

In the article entitled “Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach” (1988), Karen Offen explains that the concept of “feminism” embraces a historical plurality of ideals and demands that are not restricted, as some could think, to the claim of equal rights for women. Although many historians attribute the emergence of this movement to the women’s protest for voting at Seneca Falls, United States, in 1848, the researcher mentions that pro-women manifestations – which is not a synonym for an “anti-men” ideology – existed much earlier than that and include different requests, not necessarily directed to fairness laws. If we think about the influences and contradictions of modernity, though, we shall see how significant it was to the consolidation of this concept. According to Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), the main characteristics of this period were supposedly concerned with humankind's valorization and progress as an opposition to the previously divine subordination. However, as she explains, those new principles were not, as expected, applied to everyone, making evident the conflict on *who* was effectively considered as “human”. “Thus in the early twentieth century the figure of the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation, whose modernity signaled not an endorsement of an existing present but rather a bold imagining of an alternative future” (Felski, 1995, p. 14).

Even though we are far from fulfilling this ‘alternative future’, it is undeniable that feminists’ movements have been conquering important results in increasing women’s autonomy inside cultural and political institutions. In “Modernidade e Pós-Modernidade em Vozes Femininas” (2007), Miriam Adelman argues that instead of simply giving in the current theoretical tendency of perceiving postmodernism as the ultimate failure to humanity, we should acknowledge the social achievements that not so long ago would be unthinkable for groups of minorities. Since “[...] modern and the postmodern have been organized around a masculine norm and pay insufficient attention to the specificity of women’s lives and experiences” (Felski, 1995, p. 15), reading the world – or, in this case, literature – through feminist lens can engage us into a new perspective, one in which we can actively strive to destroy this sexual hierarchy.

As a cultural product capable of bearing and producing meanings, literary works have a considerable potentiality to provide insights about humanity. They can contribute not only for expanding our personal experiences but also for offering us a scenario where we can critically observe the configurations and deficiencies of our reality (Eagleton, 2020). As a personal representation of the world, though, these artistic objects are inevitably tied up to

their creators' perspectives of life. The apparent banality of this “logic” assumption masks, nevertheless, the underestimation on *how* certain characters are treated inside a narrative as well as *why* some themes are not taken into account as others. In the book “Literature After Feminism” (2003), Rita Felski enlightens these points by demonstrating how feminist criticism has been engaged in looking at fiction and, at the same time, in its studies tendencies through a political domain. If we considerate, as already discussed, that “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself” (Beauvoir, 2011, p. 26), then it becomes visible how many female representations, experiences and authorships have been overlooked in regard of their importance, specific qualities or ambitions. It also makes evident, according to the American professor, why feminist scholars have been especially interested in plot analyses – since many female characters “[...] are shaped by the preoccupations of masculine fantasy and cannot simply be read as accurate representations of women’s experience” (Felski, 1995, p. 21) – and their preference for narratives written by women.

This research aims to be part of this intellectual response once it contemplates some of the presented elements (such as a political view of the object, the priority for the plot, the option of a female writer – moreover a feminist one –, the narrative’s theme, among others) but mainly because it is through feminist theories that I expect to be capable of elucidating the behavioral divergence in what concerns motherhood – probably one of the most salient subjects related to women’s nature – between the two central female characters in “Zikora” (2020). I understand that as a *representation*, literature is not and should not be obliged to stand as a reliable construction of reality; it has values and patterns that resemble life but it is restricted to that: framing other human possibilities (Rosenfeld, 2014). However, on the other hand, I recognize that it is unfeasible the political or ideological neutrality of these works. Therefore, having in mind the given context and objective of this article, I assume the relevance of reading the selected short story not only within its textual elaboration but also as a cultural tool that helps us “[...] to create our sense of reality rather than simply reflecting it” (Felski, 2003, p. 13).

2 Zikora: “It’s the wanting that makes the difference”

In Adichie’s short story “Zikora” (2020), the reader is presented right at the beginning of the narrative to one of its crucial moments: Zikora’s laboring process. The description relies mainly on her feelings of pain and discomfort but it also gives us a hint about one key aspect about the plot, the relationship she has with her mother. At the very first sentence – “All through the night my mother sat near me but never touched me” (Adichie, 2020, p. 2) – we are presented with a disconcerting situation which is emphasized in the text by the word “but”. This sense of mismatch might be a result of the common association between the maternal figure and its values of care and kindness that, in the referred passage, seems to be incompatible with the action of avoiding to touch her daughter. However, as Simone de Beauvoir (2010) affirms in her famous book *The Second Sex*, human beings do not possess any “maternal instincts” and the women’s response to their children depends on how she integrates (or not) this “mother identity” among the other ones she already embodies. As part of this identification process is culturally influenced (Hall, 2019), it becomes interesting to notice how individuals behave and unconsciously create different expectations in relation to motherhood. In the story, the character’s cultural background, which is significant for their construction and also as an anticipation of the plot, is likewise presented at the beginning. “Once, I screamed, a short scream that lanced the air in the hospital room, and she said, ‘That’s how labor is,’ in Igbo, and I wanted to say, ‘No shit,’ but of course she didn’t understand colloquial Americanisms” (Adichie, 2020, p. 2). It is throughout the reading, though, that we discover why Zikora relates herself with the American culture while her mother is not be able to understand it. At first, the narrative suggests that the protagonist moved to the United States because their parents decided it would be better for her academic opportunities. However, later on, we understand that the most probable reason was, actually, due to their row regarding her father’s second wife. As the story explains, Zikora’s parents are not divorced, but because her mother could not provide a boy to inherent the father’s heritage, he decided, as the Nigerians laws permit, to have a second wife for this purpose. If we consider the cultural and political contrast of these countries, it is perspicuous the existence of a social divergence between these characters. This discrepancy regarding gender performance and duties is, actually, one of the major topics of the short story; however, for the purpose of

this study, I am going to concentrate on how the protagonist, in relation to her mother, faces these expectations on the subject of motherhood.

The first situation to be mentioned here in this respect is associated with the procedures of laboring. During the preparation for this moment, Zikora openly expresses her distress due to the pain she is feeling and imagines that she will not survive to it. “Then came a wave of exhaustion, a tiredness limp and bloodless. I was leaving my body. I could die” (Adichie, 2020, p. 2). Despite her suffer, the doctor announces that what she is feeling is “perfectly normal” which makes her more uneasy. Her emotional instability and, moreover, her “incapacity” to hold it for herself is seem by her mother not only as inadequate but also as shameful for women who should be self-respected. “I caught my mother’s glance, that icy expression she had when I was a child and did something in public where she couldn’t slap me right away as she would have liked” (Adichie, 2020, p. 3). Under the severity of this attitude, Zikora is diminished to the child she once was, subordinated to her mother’s authority and ruled by her beliefs. Notwithstanding, the story’s sequence brings in some events of the protagonist’s childhood in which she had “disgraced” her mother for not acting as she was supposed to. Although, currently, Zikora understands this manipulative posture and do not want to give in, she still feels somehow responsible for achieving her mother’s expectations.

I was disgracing her now; I was not facing labor with laced-up dignity. She wanted me to meet each rush of pain with a mute grinding of teeth, to endure pain with pride, to embrace pain, even. When I had severe cramps as a teenager, she would say, “Bear it, that is what it means to be a woman,” and it was years before I knew that girls took Buscopan for period pain. (Adichie, 2020, p. 3).

This idea of ‘that is what it means to be a woman’ is an important topic inside the feminist criticism, mostly because it deals with assumptions that are not restricted to nature but are equally influenced by culture. In what concerns motherhood, Gerda Neyer and Laura Bernardi in their work “Feminist Perspectives on Motherhood and Reproduction” (2011), state that feminists comprehend it as a process that is both biological and social, being the emphasis on the first one the reason why women become subordinated to that. In consequence, mothers might feel as if, to truly deserve the status of being a woman, they need to prove themselves for others (Beauvoir, 2010) by embracing their suffer as a condition inherited to their female nature, which disable them from an active and self-assurance posture

(Rich, 1995). This becomes especially evident when dealing with natural births, as in Zikora's case, because it functions as a "[...] prescriptive normativity on women's childbearing in a manner that deprives them of agency, inflates their expectations, and opens them to social stigmatization and a profound sense of shame if they fail to enact the ideal" (Jones, 2012, p. 108). This is what happens to the protagonist as she, under her mother's judgment and authority, endeavors to 'face labor with laced-up dignity' by not exposing her discomfort and personal thoughts, which puts her into a more passive state. The change in her behavior, as well as her mother's strict posture regarding the 'consequences of women's nature', can be noticed when Zikora gets the epidural anesthesia. At the time the doctor responsible for its application asks her mother to help him maintaining Zikora still, she refuses to do it because she believes that her daughter should be capable of supporting the needle's pain alone. "Before he finished speaking, my mother, still seated on the armchair, said, 'She can manage'" (Adichie, 2020, p. 4). The expression of surprise on the nurse's face, which reinforces the cultural divergency regarding the behavior expectations for the occurring situation, infuriates the protagonist – "It made no sense to be angry with the nurse, but I was angry with the nurse. Why did she have to make that face? Did it really surprise her?" (Adichie, 2020, p. 4) – but, this time, she kept the anger for herself. The moment she receives the injection is when we can perceive her silence and resignation more clearly. "I bent over and hugged the pillow and held still. There was the cold smear of a liquid on my back and the brief prick of a needle. Tears filled my eyes; my anger began to curdle into a darkness close to grief" (Adichie, 2020, p. 4). Differently from before, she does not plainly manifest her pain neither tries to fight it back but simply let herself be consumed by it.

Another demonstration of social idealizations towards motherhood that do not correspond to Zikora's reality is the act of birth itself. After all her trouble during the labor, the protagonist finally has her offspring but it is not as romantic as she imagined. "He came out with his mouth full of shit, and the bigger nurse, chuckling, said, 'Not the best first meal,' while somebody swiftly took him away to suction the feces from his mouth" (Adichie, 2020, p. 15). In addition, when she finally receives the baby in her arms there is no immediate or supreme bond towards her son which makes her confused. In the passage below, it is possible to visualize the influences of cultural portraits in this event which is supposed to be memorable and how it made the character lost herself between the physical sensations she was having and those emotional ones that she could not achieve:

Now here he was wrapped like a tidy sausage roll and placed on my chest. He was warm and so very small. I held him with stiff hands. I was suspended in a place of no feeling, waiting to feel. I could not separate this moment from the stories of this moment—years of stories and films and books about this scene, mother and child, mother meeting child, child in mother’s arms. I knew how I was supposed to feel, but I did not know how I felt. It was not transcendental. There was a festering red pain between my legs. Somewhere in my consciousness, a mild triumph hovered, because it was over, finally it was over, and I had pushed out the baby. (Adichie, 2020, p. 15).

This reveals how our emotions and life understandings are constantly interposed with cultural assumptions. Notwithstanding, feminists believe that the idealization of birth is what suppresses women from a true experience with it (Alcoof, 2012). In the story sequence, we see that while Zikora was still being medically treated, her mother promptly assumed the child’s care for herself and tried to schedule, without consulting his mother first, the newborn’s circumcision for that day. At first the protagonist reacts to that decision, affirming that she would not allow it, as a form to defy her mother and recover her control over the situation.

“I said I won’t circumcise him.” “Why?” She trained her eyes on me. “Barbarism,” I said, surprising myself, remembering a post on a pregnancy website. [...] I mostly ignored posts about baby boys because I thought I was having a girl [...]. But I remembered the post because I had disagreed, bristled at it. Now it was convenient ammunition. (Adichie, 2020, p. 16 – 17).

However, when her mother leaves the room, the nurse recommends the operation in case it is a cultural practice, remembering that children do not like to feel different from others. It helps Zikora to better accept the procedure but, after it is done, she feels resentful for acquiescing with it; she understood that it continued to be her mother’s manipulation and, therefore, not a decision entirely made by herself. For putting her son in face of pain, she realizes that he is under her responsibility and it is through this identification that her feelings towards him become to emerge.

I cradled him and hushed him and pushed my nipple into his mouth and then I, too, began to cry. Why had I done it? Why had I signed those forms, with my mother looking over my shoulder? I had caused my son unnecessary pain. My son. Those words: my son. He was my son. He was mine. (Adichie, 2020, p. 18).

This scene exhibits how Zikora's relationships – not forgetting hers with Kwame – interfere in how she connects with her offspring. In this line, Beauvoir (2010) defends that a mother's tie to her child depends as much on the woman's self-acceptance and subjectivity as on the support of those who are close to her. Although this study does not contemplate her relationship with Kwame, it is important to highlight, as does the philosopher, that the presence and assistance of the father is, in many cases, one significant factor to the creation of this motherhood bond. With this in mind, it becomes clear, nevertheless, why the main character could not relate initially with her son; not only she felt baffled for her broken expectations but also her mother's intimidation and Kwame's abandonment limited her willingness to devote herself to this new "part of hers". Thus, as many theorists point out (Beauvoir, 2010; Felski, 1995; Laney et al., 2015; Rich, 1995), becoming a mother is more related to the acceptance and incorporation of this identity than simply performing the birth for itself. It is about the capacity of (re)construction someone self in order to welcome this new "personality". As Elizabeth Laney *et al.* (2015, p. 139) conclude in their study, "Becoming a Mother: The Influence of Motherhood on Women's Identity Development", mothering is a transformational event that destabilizes women physically and psychologically together with the "[...] process of self-loss, identity fracturing, and redefinition". In face of postmodernity theories that classifies the individuals' subjectivity as dislocated and fractured (Hall, 2019), it is consistent that contemporary feminist scholars perceive both classifications of "woman" and "mother" as a flexible and circumstantial category (Neyer; Bernardi, 2011). All in all, motherhood can be interpreted as a result of personal and social performances upon the biological phenomenon in itself.

In "Zikora" (2020) this identity shift can be noticed, for example, when we observe the distinct attitudes of the main character in relation to her first pregnancy and the one we accompanied in the short story. The most evident indicative of her acceptance to this process is revealed when Zikora is talking to her colleague Donna and, although she feels apprehensive with her pregnancy because of Kwame's reaction, she states that "It's the wanting that makes the difference" (Adichie, 2020, p. 9). Despite the strangeness of her analogy – "I can't believe you're saying a baby is like body hair" (Adichie, 2020, p. 9) –, this confirms the idea that more than a physical change mothering is about its emotional identification. At the first time the protagonist got pregnant she was not able to embrace this condition – "I had never considered myself getting pregnant, never imagined it, and for

moments after the test showed positive, I sat drowning in disbelief” (Adichie, 2020, p. 19) – which made her feel disconcerted about what was happening to herself. Moreover, her refusal to identify with the baby did not permit herself to visualize it as a forming life but made this undesirable being look more like a parasite. “Something was growing inside me, alien, uninvited, and it felt like an infestation” (Adichie, 2020, p. 19). Her most obvious solution was to try an abortion. Without success in traditional – and usually dangerous – methods, she went to a specialized clinic where she received proper assistance for her purpose. Even though Zikora did not create in any instance a “mother identity”, it was inevitable the effects of this episode in her life. To Adrienne Rich (1995, p. 12) in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the fact of keeping the baby or not does not matter because “[...] her body has undergone irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, [and] her future as a woman has been completely shaped by the event”. It is even possible that, because of her first negative experience with pregnancy, she was not emotionally prepared to feel attached to her son in the beginning. As already mentioned, her affection is triggered when she identifies with him and understands his dependency on her.

I had given birth to him and I was responsible for him and already he knew me, moving his face blindly at my breasts. He was mine, and his tiny translucent arms lay precious against my skin. He was mine. My son. I would die for him. I thought this with a new wonder because I knew it to be true; something that had never been true in my life now suddenly was true. (Adichie, 2020, p. 18).

Zikora’s recognition of how meaningful he suddenly became to her life reveals her identification as a mother. After repenting the suffering she caused to him, she goes through a psychological connection that provokes in her a sense of expanded consciousness towards her son; a common response, conforming to Laney et al. (2015), when women turn themselves into mothers. The protagonist’s amazement with this new fact in her life even makes her want to redeem herself with her mother – “‘Mummy, I would die for him,’ I said, partly to make peace with her and partly because I need to speak this miraculous momentous thing that was true” (Adichie, 2020, p. 18) –, but her mother, on contrast, continues to interpret this event as Zikora’s obligation as a woman. “‘Thank God you managed to get pregnant at your age’, she said” (Adichie, 2020, p. 18). Her answer exposes, once again, her conservative view of life, much influenced by her cultural background, that assumes pregnancy and motherhood as elements that compete above all to their nature as females and to their social duties as women.

Inside of a feminist perspective in this concern, that women are “complete” only when they become mothers because this is their “natural destiny”, this idea is strongly refuted once individual roles in society go beyond their very nature (Beauvoir, 2020).

Through the selected episodes mentioned until this moment we could see that motherhood, in a feminist perspective, is more related to an identity process, although imbued in social and cultural stigmas, than just a natural vocation. These constructions and expectations, however, are not restricted to the pregnant herself but also to the infant even before it is born. In this last part of the analysis, we are going to investigate how the baby’s gender affected Zikora and her mother once even this biological determination transcends to cultural impositions and beliefs.

Historically, male offspring were always preferable in place of female ones. They were the ones legitimated to inherit their families’ properties, power and lineage, as well as capable of performing their independence and influence in society that, for women, was forbidden. Nonetheless, many women still desire – as patriarchally continues to operate – for a boy when they get pregnant because this implicates in privileges for the both of them: the cultural power for the child and, for the mother, the accomplishment of providing a male to the family and community (Beauvoir, 2010). Zikora, in the narrative, does not seem to have a preference for either gender, but her mother, who could never have a boy, shows herself pleased for the first time in the story when she discovers that she gained a grandson. “‘Beautiful boy,’ my mother said, smiling down at him. To me she said, ‘Congratulations,’ and it stung of the perfunctory” (Adichie, 2020, p. 16). Zikora’s mother delight for the boy – and maybe, as her tone suggests, an envy feeling of her daughter – is better understood when we remember that her husband claimed for a second wife exactly because she was not able to provide him with a son.

[...] my mother’s story: a woman from a wealthy family marries a man from a wealthy family, has one daughter, three miscarriages, and an emergency hysterectomy, after which her husband decides to marry again because he needs to have sons, and she agrees, and it is those sons who will inherit the family property (Adichie, 2020, p. 21 – 22).

Not having any sons was, actually, the reason why Zikora’s mother ended up being separated from her family. First, her husband abandoned her and moved to his new partner’s house, remaining for her only the status of “first wife”. “Respect was her reward for acquiescing” (Adichie, 2020, p. 23). Then, Zikora turned against her because she believed that

it was her mother's fault her father left them behind. "If she had not raised her voice, if she had not pushed him, my father would not have left" (Adichie, 2020, p. 23 – 24). In the end, Zikora's mother is left alone, not comprehended for her own daughter and exposed to other's judgment. "'Stay and stand by me', my mother said, and I scoffed silently, thinking she was being dramatic" (Adichie, 2020, p. 26).

The protagonist only comes to realize that it was her father's ambition and sexist behavior that destroyed their future together when she notices that the sentiment for a child, both from mothers or fathers, should be more meaningful than its gender and social representation. "I looked at my mother, standing by the window. How had I never really seen her? It was my father who destroyed, and it was my mother I blamed for the ruins left behind" (Adichie, 2020, p. 24). The narrative makes it possible to visualize how women's lives are undermined upon historical, social and cultural traditions that continue to perpetuate conservative ideals that are far from corresponding to its subject's reality or contributing for a fairness humanity (Felski, 1995). Considering that Zikora's mother comes from a culture where male dominance is even more persistent, these remarks on the narrative function as explanations for understanding her attitudes during the protagonist's labor and process of becoming a mother. On the other hand, Zikora's mother situation demonstrates that it is in order to achieve those patriarchal expectations that women remain to passively embrace their "feminine sufferings and natural condition" once their value depends on their capacity to bring up (male) life (Rich, 1995). Although, as we can see in the story's sequence, Zikora's mother continues to act in accordance with her personal and cultural beliefs, at least the protagonist is now conscious of the implications of these events in their lives. Also, the baby ends up representing a link between these two characters as her mother stays to help Zikora to take care of him. "'I don't know what I'll do when you leave,' I said. 'My visa is long stay,' she said. 'I'm not going anywhere yet.' 'Thank you, Mummy,' I said, and I began to cry." (Adichie, 2020, p. 26).

Conclusion

In the present analysis, we could observe the implications of cultural and social stigmas in the process of motherhood. As this is an important theme for feminist studies (Neyer; Bernardi, 2011) the support of theories related to this scope made it possible to better

understand these political mechanisms disposed inside the narrative. By investigating how the beliefs and behavior of Zikora's mother influenced the protagonist's actions towards her offspring, we were able to visualize that motherhood transcends its common association with nature to one that is inevitably blended with cultural assumptions and gender expectations. In this sense, it became visible that her mother, influenced by her cultural background and personal experiences, reproduces "[...] an essentialist notion of femininity, one that allies 'the female' to a host of traditionally devalued cultural categories" (Jones, 2012, p. 107). Zikora, on the other hand, demonstrates how these invisible mechanisms, especially when coming from close relationships, strongly influences not only the performance of the birth itself but also the bond she might have with the newborn. Therefore, as previously discussed, becoming a mother, from a feminist perspective, is more about accepting and incorporating this new identity than expecting a "natural" and idealized connection with the infant.

Finally, this research aimed to contribute both for literary and feminist studies by bringing in a discussion that allows us to explore humanity from its production and ideology. With this article, I hope to manifest the importance of discovering new stories that might help us to expand our cultural, social and personal views of life in face of the hegemonic narratives. Future studies on "Zikora" (2020) in this feminist line might be interested in examining the main character's relationship with Kwame or developing further insights about what her son represents to the story. At last, I cite one final quote from Adichie that summarizes the conclusion of this paper: "The problem with gender, is that it prescribes *how we should be* rather than recognizing *how we are*" (Adichie, 2013, n. p., my emphasis).

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