

Feminism in Chimamanda Adichie's Novel *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Nigerian literature in English has witnessed impressive expansion in the past few decades. The most notable feature of Nigerian literature is the rise of women writers who have created immortal books in English. Chimamanda Adichie is one such prolific writer whose debut novel "Purple Hibiscus" mirrors the enchanting beauty and richness of the country without shying away from capturing its trauma, tragedy, desperation, resignation and political tribulations. The novel presents a moving picture of the effect of domestic violence on children, of religious fanaticism and of the political unrest in Nigeria. At the core of the novel are a brother and sister who seem to have a perfect life, but in reality, it is slowly suffocating them. The novel is at once the portrait of a country and a family, of terrible choices and the tremulous pleasure of an odd, rare purple hibiscus blooming amid a conforming sea of red ones. The novel is a feminist work that challenges the dehumanising tendencies of patriarchy and the oppression of women in postcolonial Nigerian society. The novel depicts how women can assert themselves in a male-dominated world through education and female solidarity.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Religious Fanaticism, Oppression, Female Solidarity.

Feminism, in simple terms, is the belief in social, political and economic equality of the sexes. Although feminist thinkers have always existed, Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is considered one of the first written works that can unambiguously be called feminist philosophy. Feminism as an organized movement appeared in the late nineteenth century in several countries. Agitation for women's voting rights became increasingly visible and vocal at the beginning of the twentieth century. After the granting of suffrage, women's movements turned to other issues of social reform and equality. The two World Wars changed much of the world and with it the perception of women's work outside the home. After the Second World War, feminism entered a second stage with campaigns for reproductive rights and the removal of discrimination, and the United Nations created an office to represent women's rights. Since then feminism has continued to reinvent and redefine itself to adapt to a changing world and a diversity of cultures.

Modern African feminism is about confronting patriarchal mythmaking on one hand and tackling racist stereotypes on the other. One of the recent writers of Africa who proudly identifies herself as a feminist is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her essay "We Should All Be Feminists" Adichie explains how feminism should be in the twenty-first century. This essay, published in 2014, was adapted from Adichie's 2012 TEDx talk. In the essay, Adichie argues that we must challenge long-held beliefs and gender stereotypes that perpetuate inequality between men and women. Saying that "Culture does not make people; people make culture," Adichie highlights the need for a cultural shift to achieve gender equality. She says that all men and women should be feminists who champion the rights of women.

Purple Hibiscus, the debut novel of Adichie, is a feminist work that challenges the dehumanising tendencies of patriarchy. Published in 2003, this novel won the Best First Book Award at the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. A close reading of the novel shows the writer's art of portraying women characters with special focus and emphasis on their individuality. Of the many types of feminism, individualist feminism is a blanket term for different forms of individualist feminist ideas. While other types of feminism often stress that women in general are living under similar circumstances, individualist feminists stress that all women are unique and have unique goals. A core principle of this type of feminism is that all human beings have a moral and legal claim to their persons and property. Individualist feminism is distinct from both mainstream and radical feminist movements. In their rhetoric, individualist feminists emphasise individual empowerment, responsibility, and equality of rights. In short, individualist feminism calls for freedom, choice, and personal responsibility.

Set in post-colonial Nigeria, the novel *Purple Hibiscus* is narrated in first person by the central character Kambili Achike, a fifteen-year-old girl. She and her brother Jaja are the children of a rich, fanatical and oppressive Catholic patriarch Eugene Achike. As Stanley in his online article describes, "The first sentence of *Purple Hibiscus* reads: Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (3). The work's first line is a feminist manifesto. It's also a patriarchal comment from Achike.

The novel begins on Palm Sunday. Jaja has refused to go to church and receive communion. Because Jaja has no reasonable excuse for missing church, Papa Eugene throws his missal at his son. The book hits a shelf containing his wife's beloved figurines. This defiant act and resulting violence marks the beginning of the end of the Achike family. Kambili then explains the events leading up to Palm Sunday, detailing the seeds of rebellion that are planted in the children's minds by their liberal Auntie Ifeoma, Papa's sister.

Papa Eugene is a prominent figure in Enugu. He owns several factories and publishes the pro-democracy newspaper *The Standard*. He is praised by his priest Father Benedict, and his editor Ade Coker, for his many good works. He donates generously to his parish and his children's schools. But though he is well respected by the community and generous to outsiders, he is a despot at home. Kambili's family live in a house surrounded by high compound walls topped with electrified cables. She and her brother Jaja are driven to school each day by the chauffeur. After school hours, they should run back to the waiting car or they will be punished at home. Music, dancing and having fun are prohibited. Friendship with other children is discouraged. Instead, they must follow Eugene's schedule which allows only time to study, eat, pray and sit with family.

Kambili is a quiet child. When she tries to speak, she often stutters or has a coughing fit. The rigid life that is shaped by her father seems to have rendered her mute. She is a good student most often rising to the top of her class. Once when she got the second rank, she waits in sheer terror and with bated breath for the nasty consequences that are sure to follow. The girls at school assume she is a snob because she doesn't socialise and always runs straight to her father's car after class. But, in reality, she is not a snob; rather she is motivated by fear, unable to create her own identity.

Eugene has repudiated his father Papa-Nnukwu, for refusing to convert to Catholicism, and turned his grandchildren against him, allowing them only fifteen minutes a year with him at Christmas. Papa calls his father a "heathen" (62) because he still follows the religious traditions of his people, the Igbo. Once when Auntie Ifeoma invites Kambili and Jaja to visit

so they can go on a pilgrimage to Aokpe, the site of a miraculous apparition of the Virgin Mary, Papa begrudgingly agrees.

Nsukka, the hometown of Aunt Ifeoma, is a different world. Here, even while the two children are free from their father's physical presence, they are still unable to shake off their father's shadow. Every time the phone rings, Kambili quakes in fear. Gradually they observe how their widowed Aunt Ifeoma successfully raises her three children, Amaka, Obiora and Chima, with what little she has. But her family is a happy one. Unlike Papa, Aunt Ifeoma encourages her children to question authority, raising them with faith but also intellectual curiosity. Amaka and Kambili are very different girls. Amaka, like Kambili's classmates, assumes her cousin is a privileged snob since she does not know how to contribute to household chores. Kambili retreats into silence even in Nsukka. Jaja, on the other hand, blossoms by following the example of his younger cousin Obiora. It is at her aunt's house that Kambili first meets Father Amadi. He is a young priest who wears jeans and shorts, coaches local boys in football and has progressive ideas about church worship. Through him, Kambili starts viewing religion differently, realising that it can have a human face and that it can even incorporate singing.

It is at Aunt Ifeoma's house that the children first discover the purple hibiscus. The purple hibiscus flower is an uncommon and experimental hybrid species of the hibiscus plant. The reaction of the children when they first see the purple hibiscus is described as follows, "That's a hibiscus, isn't it, Aunt? Jaja asked, staring at a plant close to the barbed wire fencing. 'I didn't know there were purple hibiscuses' (128). The flower is symbolic of defiance, freedom and hope. As Davis in her online article says, "For Jaja, the flower being a new creation and uniquely beautiful, represents freedom. It is a symbol of an alternative to the rigid life that has been created by their father for him and his sister. When he takes the stalks to his home, he brings with them a new sense of self and possibility."

Kambili's garden at home had only red hibiscus flowers which propagate profusely. Red symbolises oppression as well as the blood spilt during the miscarriages. The clandestine introduction of purple hibiscus cuttings into the garden reflects the gradual breaking down of Eugene's power. The motif of freedom is further developed by Kambili who sees the plant as symbolic of inward liberation. As she says, "Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunt Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom" (16).

Kambili and Jaja learn to be more accepting and understanding in Nsukka. When their grandfather Papa-Nnukwu falls ill, Aunt Ifeoma brings him to her flat. Kambili and Jaja decide not to tell Papa that they are sharing a home with a "heathen" (62). Kambili witnesses her grandfather's morning ritual of innocence, where he offers thanks to his gods and proclaims his good deeds. She sees the beauty in this ritual and begins to understand that the difference between herself and Papa-Nnukwu is not so great. When her father finds out that Kambili and Jaja have spent time with their grandfather, he brings them home and punishes them by pouring hot water over their feet for "walking into sin." (194)

Papa rationalises the violence he inflicts on his family, saying it is for their good. The beatings have rendered his children mute. Kambili and Jaja are both wise beyond their years and also not allowed to reach adulthood, as maturity often comes with questioning authority. Within the narrative of the novel, Beatrice loses two pregnancies because of Eugene's flogging. Whenever she miscarries, Eugene makes the children say special novenas for their mother's forgiveness. Even though he is to blame, he insinuates it is his wife's fault.

In the beginning, Beatrice believes that she cannot exist outside her marriage. So she tolerates the abuse. But gradually the abuse represses her to the point that she must resort to murder to escape. This desperate act can be considered as a plea for survival. Survival feminism is a feminist theory that emerged in Africa as women faced economic and political challenges. It is characterised by women questioning and redefining gender and family roles in society and for individuals. This survivalism is a policy of trying to ensure one's survival; it is based on the primacy of survival as a value.

Several characters are gripped with silence throughout the novel. Kambili suffers the most, unable to speak more than rehearsed platitudes without stuttering or coughing. Her silence is a product of the abuse that she endures at the hands of her father. Kambili does not allow herself to tell the truth about her situation at home. When her classmates taunt her for being a backyard snob, she does not explain that she does not socialise because she is afraid. She is not allowed to dally after school lest she be late and beaten. She finally learns how to speak her mind when she is taunted continuously by her cousin Amaka. Auntie Ifeoma encourages her to defend herself and only then can Amaka and Kambili begin their friendship. Kambili begins to speak more confidently, laugh and even sing.

On several occasions, Eugene beats his wife and children. Each time, he is provoked by an action that he deems immoral. When Beatrice does not want to visit Father Benedict because she is ill, Eugene beats her and she miscarries. However human patience and endurance to injustice are definite and limited. In a particular instance, when Eugene beats his wife and children, the wife Beatrice takes from him the belt with which he flogs them and quietly lays it on the table. The final method adopted by Beatrice to put an end to Eugene's violence aligns with the principles of radical feminism. She adopts the means of violence to put an end to violence, by poisoning his tea little by little every day. Getting weaker by the day, Eugene becomes a shivering personality and finally dies. After his death, the children understand that Mama is responsible but Jaja willingly accepts the responsibility and goes to prison.

The final chapter of the book takes place nearly three years later. Kambili and Mama visit a hardened Jaja in prison. He has faced severe punishments and miserable conditions over the course of his term. However, with the leadership in Nigeria changing again, their lawyers are confident that Jaja will be released. Though Jaja has learned not to expect a favourable outcome, Kambili is overjoyed. She dreams that she will take Jaja to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma, together they will plant orange trees in Abba, and purple hibiscuses will bloom again.

The book mirrors the enchanting beauty and richness of the country without shying away from capturing its trauma, tragedy, desperation, resignation and political tribulations. It also presents a moving picture of the effect of domestic violence on children, of religious fanaticism and of the political unrest in Nigeria. Oppression is a theme that haunts every page of the novel. The novel shows why oppression need not be tolerated in any form. Oppression will continue only as long as people are silent. Freedom can be achieved through resistance and protest against injustice. In this novel, three people are the victims of one man's cruelty. The oppressor is Eugene and the victims are his wife Beatrice, son Jaja and daughter Kambili. As oppression becomes intolerable, each of these characters decides to ensure their survival in widely different ways. Jaja becomes overtly defiant, Kambili mildly disobedient, but it is the mother who finally takes matters into her own hands and commits a crime so that she and her children can survive.

The novel exposes the African concept of an ideal woman. The character of Kambili's mother, Beatrice Achike is an instance of this. For the major part of her life, she remains silent in the face of humiliation and brutality. Her husband is extremely brutal to her but she copes by cleaning the figurines in the house soon after an episode of violence. It is only when his brutality towards the children increases that Beatrice decides to take action. As Ann in her journal article says,

Ifeoma was associated with the radical way of standing up for her rights while Mama at the beginning of the novel was liberal but when it became obvious that her life was at risk, she dammed the consequences and went radical. This is a deliberate attempt by Adichie to prove that radical feminism is a reaction to some circumstances, she believes that one can't wake up and start crushing anything that stands in his/her way. It is often prompted by situations that seem to overpower the person. Mama's radical way of ending her husband's life was prompted by his violent actions which she brought to an end by poisoning his tea.

Kambili's father is both evil and loving, both a benevolent protector and an emotional terrorist. While Kambili desperately wants her father's love and has a natural attachment to her blood roots, she simultaneously wishes to sever her connection to her father, along with the tyrannical rule that comes with him. Kambili's house is falling. Propriety and submission are valued over free will, and while her controlling father is the overlord of all he surveys-revered in the community and church-his family is coming apart at the seams. When Kambili is allowed to spend time with her independent and strong-willed Aunt Ifeoma, she is introduced to a world without rigid schedules, religious rules or a supreme Monarch.

Adichie's work grows into the past as well as the future. Tradition, custom and ritual anchor the roots while the symbolic purple hibiscus - rare, individual reaches for the light. The purple hibiscus becomes a metaphor for freedom and independence. While a flower may seem delicate in constitution, purple is historically associated with royalty and the divine. The purple flower then comes to signify Kambili's urge to bloom, her instinct to look for the light. Kambili's sagacious instinct to spend time with her Aunt resembles a tender shoot growing up between cement slabs, working its way past enormous obstacles towards whatever light it can find. In the climactic conclusion of the novel, the characters split out of their shells and change in surprising, if not shocking ways. The rebellion that has been fuelling throughout the book ignites a fatal spark, and the rule of evil burns down.

The novel depicts how women can assert themselves in a male-dominated world through education and female solidarity. This aspect is brought out through the character of Aunt Ifeoma who is highly educated and dares to stand her ground in personal and professional life. She too has a lot of loss in life. As a young widow with three children, she refused to consider remarriage that society tried to impose on her. As a lecturer at the university also, she raises her voice against injustice and doesn't fear the possibility of losing her job. She is fired from the job but before that, she attends an interview for a job in America and gets selected for it. She is a strong woman who inspires Kambili a lot. After observing the silent nature of her mother, Kambili is surprised to see the strength of Aunt Ifeoma as she stands against her brother, supports her father and independently drives around to meet the needs of her family. She advises her sister-in-law, Kambili's mother, not to put up with domestic violence and asks her to leave her husband. It is she who gives a ray of hope to the family when everything falls apart in Kambili's house.

In this novel, Adichie has introduced women characters who display their strength and hidden potential after being unfairly exploited by people close to them. These voiceless

victims suffer a lot before they make strong, valid decisions to cope with the dilemmas in their lives. Adichie's women characters are strong-willed persons who tolerate, only to an extent, the injustice meted out to them. They achieve what they want in life as they progress from unhappy to happy individuals. They prefer calm and silent action to screaming for their rights. Although the end they want to achieve is the same, the means that they adopt are markedly different from each other. Each of the characters in her novel tends to the unique needs of their soul by making a thorough study of themselves. This novel is at once the portrait of a country and a family, of terrible choices and the tremulous pleasure of an odd, rare purple hibiscus blooming amid a conforming sea of red ones. Adichie, therefore, creates a masterly work with *Purple Hibiscus*, a work that is carefully planted and lovingly tended.

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