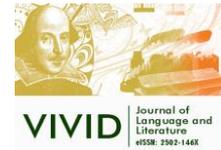




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Literature

# Patriarchal Oppression and Women Empowerment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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### A B S T R A C T

This study examines how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* interrogates the oppressions of women in the Nigerian patriarchal society and how women empower each other lead them to women empowerment. The study shows how the oppressions of women is represented through female characters which perpetually put women in disadvantaged positions as portrayed in *Purple Hibiscus*. One of the most despicable oppression among the so well-known cultural practices in Nigeria is the patriarchal oppression. However, as the events unfold, efforts will be made in order to reveal of how African women are rated based on the good and real women as represented by Beatrice and Ifeoma. I argue that Adichie's approach to subvert patriarchal oppression describes that despite the struggle and pain, women assert themselves in the world of patriarchy through education and sisterhood. Adichie's novel suggests women empowerment through social transformation confronted by women. The title of the novel, "*Purple Hibiscus*" may refer to a particular type of flower, but it also emphasizes the triumph of the innovative suggesting that the unusual is not necessarily bad as it looks which aims to women empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

Women have suffered maltreatment in so many ways whether it is domestic or public violence. Women's voices remained unheard due to their existence regarded as second class human being. Acholonu [1] opines that women are "Trapped in the claws of the taboos and the restrictions that only help to propel male chauvinism." Katrak [2] argues that a female child grows from childhood to womanhood to motherhood; she is controlled and owned by her father,

her husband, and then her sons, ensuring the continuation of the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society.

In 1982, Ngungi Wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan writer states that "Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given impetus, shape, direction, and even an area of concern by social and economic forces in particular society". This statement leads to the fact that literature is a mirror of the society we live in and it is drawn from human experiences in order to depict the true imitation of life in society. In order to free themselves from the oppression and dominance of the patriarchy, women have tended to organize themselves into groups. Through this process, they aim towards emancipating themselves and gain the equal social status as well as access to opportunities with the men.

Nowadays, women in the novel represented in different ways than before according to the purposes and messages of the authors. Giddens says "It is through socialization that the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture in which he or she was born" [3]. Therefore, in this paper, I am trying to see how a young female author depicts patriarchal oppression which leads the victims to women empowerment in order to free themselves from the oppressions.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Nigerian author whose work drew extensively on the Biafran war in Nigeria during the late 1960s. In recent years, she attracts the attention of critics and public more than any African writer of her generation. The reviews of her fiction can be found in both newspapers and academic journals. Adichie's reputation was further intensified by the success of *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel won the 2004 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Best Debut Fiction and the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book and in 2004 it was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction and long-listed for the Booker Prize. Her works have been translated into thirty languages and also appeared in various publications such as *The O. Henry Prize Stories* (2003), *The New Yorker*, and *The Financial Times* magazine. *Purple Hibiscus* is set in post-colonial Nigeria during the Civil War in the late 1960s about the female characters who have received the unequal treatment from the patriarch in the family.

In her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie reworks on the images of women projected by patriarchal oppressions which marginalized women and cause them to suffer both physically and mentally. Adichie depicts the identity of women as wives and highlights different forms of patriarchal oppression and how those oppressions lead to women empowerment. Therefore, it will be interesting to discuss *Purple Hibiscus* since Adichie implicitly involved in the creation of discourse which meant to push women from the margins to the centre as she confronts patriarchy. Thus to note the various forms of patriarchal oppression of women in her work as well as how she successfully has achieved the empowerment for her female characters.

## METHOD

Women's right and privileges are denied by the patriarchal society. It is an institution of male-rule which put women in disadvantaged situation due to its oppression and dominance. The unequal power relations between women and men have influence the control of men power and status towards women. Johnstone states that "Struggles over power and control are often struggles over whose words get used and whose do not and over whom get to speak and who

does not” [4]. Kate Millett in one of her writings *Sexual Politics* argues that all aspects in society are influenced by patriarchy and male oppression. She sees patriarchy subordinates the female to the male, or treats the female force, direct pressure, in civil and domestic life to constrain women [5]. Adrienne Rich who’s also an American feminist just like Millet defines patriarchy as “The power of the fathers; a familial- language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male” [6]. Since then, there have been so many authors who create literary work that portrays the oppressions and dominance of women. Years of patriarchy, oppression, and domination has led to feminism movements, a rejection of subservience and a search for women’s self discovery.

Charles Fourier, the Utopian Socialist and French philosopher, is credited to have originated the word “feminism” in 1837. The words – “feminism” and “feminist” – first appeared in France and the Netherlands in 1872. Tyson examines feminist criticism as “the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women” [7]. Feminist criticism is also concerned with various forms of marginalization towards women. It reminds us that women and men write differently and analyze at how the gender of the author affects how literature is written. Many feminist critics look at how the characters, especially the female characters, are portrayed and ask us to consider how the portrayal of female characters as Lynn called it as “reinforces or undermines sexual stereotypes”.

The feminist criticism stands for female assertion; an effort by women to claim proper treatment and places in the society. As a part of second wave feminism, gynocriticism which pioneered by Elaine Showalter aims to women’s self-discovery and exploration of a literature written by women will be used to examine patriarchal oppression and women empowerment [8]. In an effort to empower the female characters, Adichie Furthermore, it also provides a framework for understanding aspects of women empowerment that shaped by the experiences of women in patriarchal society [9].

In conducting this research, the primary data are taken from *Purple Hibiscus* novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie [9] and the secondary data are taken from journals, articles, literary book, thesis, and critical essays in line with the study’s primary purpose. The collected data are analyzed by using the feminist literary criticism to find the patriarchal oppression and women empowerment. In presenting the findings, the writer will present them descriptively.

## DISCUSSION

### **Patriarchal Oppression and Women Empowerment in *Purple Hibiscus***

Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful narrator of a fifteen years old Kambili Achike who together with her mother and her brother are the victims of domestic violence of the patriarch in the family, Eugene (Papa). Kambili, her mother Beatrice, and her brother Jaja, live in fear of Eugene’s wrath as he controls almost every aspect of their lives. His extreme belief makes him control his family according to the way he wanted which leaves the members of the household with only one option of speaking “with their spirits than with their lips” (p. 16). By this, the narrator means that the members of the family cannot voice out their feelings freely.

Adichie's writing is an effort to voice the needs of women in a way that challenge the status quo. In her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie presents the tyrannical, wicked, and hypocritical Eugene Achike and how he rules his is a typical example of patriarchal way of life found in some families in Africa. The lives of his wife and children rotate around his tight and carefully plotted schedules which leaves no room for idleness or personal free time for his family. Orie buttresses this point and states:

Eugene (Papa) is the symbol of patriarchy whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps the females under fear, tension; so they are silenced. In fact, Kambili early on, sounds lachrymal: "I feel suffocated" (p. 7) and at another time he bursts out, bemused: "Fear, I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavors and colors" [10].

The members of Eugene's family do not have mind of their own, instead they live according to his rules and orders and he oppresses them until the point that the oppression itself feels "normal" for them. Oppression at the matrimonial level as one of the mountains that keep women in subordination [11]. According to her, oppressions draw its strength from the submissive of its victims who accept their image and get paralyzed by the sense of helplessness. Even when her life was endangered to the extent of losing her pregnancy; Beatrice (Mama) herself endured her husband's maltreatment. Adichie depicts Mama as quiet and obedient at the beginning of the novel but she became radical towards the end of the novel to show that she can react when things starting to fall apart. Adichie's novel therefore hit at the glaring inequalities so as to produce the required change likely to bring equity among husbands and wives.

Through the character of Beatrice, Adichie's shows how wives are oppresses by their husband. Beatrice is the type of wife that African calls as "good" women because she obeys her husband all the time. She lives in a world that is controlled by her husband and she is does not have any choice or feeling of her own. One of the evidence that proof this is when the family visits Father Benedict after a Sunday Mass. Beatrice happens to be feel nausea and dizziness which makes her tells her husband that she wants to wait in the car instead of joining her family to see Father Benedict. But Eugene sees this action as a threat to his authority, seeing the expression of her husband's face after she tells him that she wants to wait in the car, she changes her mind and decides to follow him bearing the pain silently. Even though she follows her husband's order, yet she is later brutally beaten at home for that initial act of refusing and suffers a miscarriage.

Beatrice is not the only victim in the family, the siblings Kambili and Jaja also physically oppressed by their father and live in fear due to his violent attacks. Eugene throws the missal at Jaja for not participating in the Sunday mass. Although Eugene expresses his love and fulfills their needs, the inhuman treatment that he gave them far surpasses the love that he claims to have for them. When Eugene discover that Kambili and Jaja stayed at the same house with his sinful father Pa Nnukwu (Eugene's father with traditional belief) during their visit to Auntie Ifeoma's house, he boils water in a kettle and scalds their feet with it because from Eugene's perspective, Pa Nnukwu is a tantamount to willful evil because they have different beliefs. Another event of his violent attack happens when he found out that Kambili brings a picture of Pa Nnukwu to their home and trying to protect it from destruction. Eugen kicks her, and

“The kicking increased in tempo...The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal buckle on his slippers landed on open skin by my side, my back, my legs. Kicking, kicking, kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy..More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet (p. 210-211).”

Kambili remains unconscious for several days and is hospitalized as a result of this cruel-brutal attack from her own father. This happens because Eugene does not want any heathen object in his house even though the painting of his own father. However, at his point, Kambili has become disappointed with her father and with great effort she resent her mother for failing on protecting her from her father’s attack and for making excuses for his actions. She “Wished (she could get up and hug her, and yet (she) wanted to push her away, to shove her head so hard that she would topple over the chair” (p. 213). And Jaja who’s desire is to protect his mother and sister from their father, endure the consequence for taking the responsibility of imprisonment for the death of Eugene after Beatrice poison his tea which cause him dead.

Compared to Beatrice, Ifeoma (Eugene’s sister) is a type of woman who is not afraid of anyone and will speak up when things are going wrong which represents her as the real women and is something that should not be proud of in African society who has traditional view. Ifeoma is bold, hardworking, strong, assertive, and economically independent. Although her late husbands’ family members put her under pressure for different reasons, she refuses to succumb to male intimidation and threats from the in-laws. She is also bold enough to tell Eugene the truth about his unfair treatment to their father. She takes over the role of Eugene in taking care of their father despite her limited resources. She stands against oppressions when everyone else is silent. Through Ifeoma’s character, Adichie shows that the oppressed should constantly challenge their oppressor.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Ifeoma forms friendship with her sister-in-law Beatrice and attempt to pull her out of a disastrous marriage so Beatrice can think independently and quit domestic abuse. In doing so, Ifeoma taunts women whose living abusive relationship to seek an alternative lifestyle outside marriage. She also suggests to Beatrice that life may begin at the end of a marriage (51). Beatrice is close to Sisi, her maid servant and whom she gets the poison that kills Eugene. This is a case of women helping other women to end oppression.

## CONCLUSION

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie identifies domestic violence, religion, tradition and family life as responsible for oppression of women and she challenges women to have a voice as to fight their oppressor. The characters of Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* are the epitomes of women asserting their positions in their society and challenging patriarchy with its several manifestations. Beatrice personifies the stereotyped image of African women as oppressed, voiceless, and victimized but changed after her friendship with Ifeoma empowered her. Beatrice struggles from the suffering caused by Eugene and act as the pro-active character that kills patriarchy (by poisoning her husband) purely by her very own decision. Kambili and Jaja’s visit to Ifeoma house leads to revolution because during their time there has cause them desire for freedom as well as discover their true self. After Eugene’s death and Jaja’s imprisonment,

Beatrice as well as Kambili takes over the family business. They even know who to bribe, hire, or fire. Though they are silent, they are silent with peace, freedom and joy. Furthermore, the case of women joining together and empower each other to pursue a common goal in the novel is so well depicted by Adichie since there is triumph in groups and because there is strength in numbers, there are higher chances of succeeding. Thus, her women characters in the novel represent a strong response to challenge the life in patriarchal society as they succeeded to free themselves from patriarchal oppressions.

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