

# Breaking the Stereotypes: A Feminist Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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## Abstract

Adichie's Purple Hibiscus is a feminist work that confronts the patriarchal dominance of papa as evident in the character of mama (Beatrice Achike) who ultimately exposed the African perception of an archetypal woman who keeps dumb even in the face of humiliation, victimization and brutality so as to be perceived as a good woman. We may illustrate that Beatrice Achike belongs to the category of liberal feminism but as events unfolds; she was forced by situations beyond her control to respond and go radical in order to crumble anything that stands in her way to happiness. Efforts will be made to show how African women are rated based on the real and good women as exemplified by Aunty Ifeoma and Beatrice Achike respectively. This paper explores the different aspects of feminism will acknowledge that radical feminism is an off shoot of violence. We shall argue that radical feminism is a radical reaction to dehumanization, humiliation and violence.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Adichie, , Feminism, Humiliation, Identity, Stereotypes, Fanatic, Patriarchal society, Victimization , Gender, Africa.

Adichie is one of the contemporary Nigerian writers whose writings offer a promising discussion in postcolonial literature. She was born in Lagos and grew up in the University of Nsukka campuses where both her parents worked, her father as a professor of statistics and her mother as a registrar. Adichie published Purple Hibiscus in the year 2003 and Half of a Yellow Sun in 2006, a collection of short stories The Thing Around Your Neck in 2009 as well as Americanah in 2013. Adichie's works offer an insight of defining and analysing women's writings. She let her female characters tell stories she wants her readers to hear. For instance, in her two novels Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun, the reader hears stories narrated by female characters.

These narrators represent various issues on violence against women. The second novel, Half of a Yellow Sun, specifically discusses the traumas of the Biafran war, ethnic conflicts and religious antagonism in Nigeria. . Both of Adichie's novels, Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun as well as her collection of short stories, The Thing Around Your Neck, are useful in understanding how the mistreatment, deprivation, suppression, and humiliation of women are variously represented in African women's writings.

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This paper concentrates on Purple Hibiscus by examining how Adichie treats the theme of violence and its attendant effects in the novel. Purple Hibiscus allows for the examination and analysis of violence on women in a society occupied by Catholics, traditionalists and also dominated by patriarchal system. Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun treats themes which are closely related to Purple Hibiscus but with a different orientation because of its content and associated traumatic experience. The Thing around Your Neck has stories which cannot allow for a sustained analysis of violence on women in the manner that Purple Hibiscus does.

Eugene is a male figure, like the Head of State of Nigeria, who uses violence to suppress women, men and children for their own benefits. In, my study I observe psychological violence on characters as a result of violence. I argue that silence is always reciprocal: whoever perpetuates silence is bound to be silenced in return. Hence silence is violence in words, inflicting pain to someone either physically or psychologically. Feminists examine the way patriarchy shapes male texts portraying human male characters as superior and female characters as inferior. Their proposition is to value works of female writers as much as those done by male writers and pay attention to female characters with voice and power to react to social-cultural problems in society. The novel portrays male characters as perpetrators of violence on female characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. The novel uses a female character Kambili who is the main character to tell the story.

Kambili is a fifteen year old girl when the story begins who later on grows older. Second born to Eugene and Beatrice and a sister to Jaja. Kambili has been raised in a Catholic background, is very obedient to her father, submissive, and attentive to whatever is happening in her life, her brother's life, and mother's life, as well as other people's lives. Although she lives in Enugu, Kambili gets to know, during Christmas, some of her relatives in Abba, for instance, Ifeoma her aunt, her cousins Amaka, Obiora and Chima, and Papa-Nnukwu, her grandfather. In Enugu, Kambili falls prey to her father's violence and witness's violence on her mother as well as violence on her brother.

Kambili begins the story with the phrase, "Things started to fall apart at home," (Adichie 4). The phrase signals that something which was intact is about to disintegrate, thus drawing the reader's attention to finding out why "things started to fall apart at home". Through flashbacks the reader is told of the past in relation to the present. What is about to fall apart in Eugene's family is the family, falling from the recurrent violence perpetuated by Eugene. Elements of intertextuality in Purple Hibiscus are evident due to allusions to Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart. In Purple Hibiscus, the phrase, "Things fall apart" is a guide in the analysis of how violence contributes to the falling apart of Eugene's family and the societies of Enugu and Nsukka and it also forces the reader to think about what could have been.

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Eugene expects his children Jaja and Kambili to be faithful servants of Catholicism who excel at school. In the process of moulding children's future, Eugene uses violence to force Kambili and Jaja into following religion as a reference for a decent life. Consequently Kambili is observed suffering at the hands of her violent father who expects maximum obedience from her. Kambili, while telling the story provides scenes which are fraught with suffering. Her first experience of pain is associated with "tea" a beverage she is normally given by her father. Eugene shares the drink with his family often because it creates a special bond among them. But the tea Kambili gets is very hot and burns her tongue though she enjoyed it too. Kambili and Jaja are asked to have "a love sip" and yet the love is full of violence.

Kambili is also mercilessly scalded by her father Eugene when he finds out that his children had stayed in the same house with a pagan (Papa-Nnukwu), who happens to be Kambili's grandfather. The children, Kambili and Jaja had gone to greet their aunt Ifeoma in Nsukka when Papa-Nnukwu is brought by Ifeoma from Abba so that Papa-Nnukwu can receive medical attention. Eugene, with fury, rides to Nsukka to pick his children to protect them from heathenism. Back home, Eugene tortures Kambili by soaking her feet in hot water which he spill onto her feet. Beatrice is a mother to Kambili and Jaja, a wife to Eugene and sister-in-law to Ifeoma. Beatrice, as a wife, is obedient to her husband, Eugene.

She follows her husband's religion (Catholicism) as a member of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group who meet for prayers in Beatrice's house. She is a protective mother although powerless before her husband. Beatrice's concern for her house is to make it shiny and beautiful, and thus she decorates her home with figurines, which she polishes daily. Since being married to Eugene, Beatrice endures untold suffering at the hands of her husband. Beatrice's sister-in-law, Ifeoma, consoles Beatrice morally and the two mothers share many stories although Beatrice is an uneducated house-wife. Beatrice and Ifeoma, as sisters-in-law and mothers, also develop a connection with their children so that they can know each other and enjoy teenage life.

When the narrative opens, Beatrice's figurines are broken by Eugene's heavy missal in his attempt to hit their son, Jaja, for not partaking communion at the church during the Palm Sunday. The number of thuds Kambili hears in her parents' room can be connected to the way Eugene hits the figurines and breaks them. The blood she loses accounts for her numerous miscarriages after being pummeled by her husband. Eugene sadistically ignores the pain and suffering of his wife. Eugene aspires to be recognised as a strong, wealthy, religious and feared man in Enugu. His obsession also blinds him to his excesses; he acts violently to his wife regardless of the destruction he causes in her life. Eugene believes he is a good husband, without

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observing his deeds. As a Catholic, he cannot even marry another wife but he blinds Beatrice to accept battery as a normal part of her existence.

Beatrice is conditioned by her husband to always wait for his daily needs despite the abuses she experiences. Eugene does not assist his wife to hold a business, thus subjecting her to a life of servitude. She remains isolated and can only share her pain about Eugene's violence with Ifeoma. The village members (umunna) discussing Beatrice inability to bear children, are blinded by the way how patriarchy operates. Patriarchy always favours men to justify its existence onto women's lives. On the whole, the violence Beatrice suffers at the hands of Eugene are horrific and inhuman as they are inescapable. At end of the narrative, Beatrice suffers from a mental breakdown after poisoning her husband. Beatrice is psychologically disturbed after committing the worst possible offense of killing her husband. After poisoning her husband, Beatrice is devastated. It is evident that Eugene's extreme violence and insensitivity to the needs of other members of the family has driven them to the edge of murder.

It was discussed that violence on these female characters destroyed their lives by suppressing their voices, injuring and developing vengeance thoughts to the victims. This study also examined how male characters are victimized by their violent actions which thereafter wind up destroying the entire society in the process of vengeance against the perpetrators of violence. Feminists point out that in most cultures throughout history men have received more opportunities than women. In the modern era women have numerous opportunities yet their voices are denied.

The refutation of women's voices and equalities lead to the strong persuasion power in her and it is replicated as feminism. Women play an important role under the decree of men. She becomes a slave by accepting the master's commands and a "true feminist" is someone who recognizes that men, just like women, are trapped within the patriarchal roles that society has placed on them and to be freed from racial inequity. Black women's physical experiences as members of specific race, class, and gender groups as well as historical events on women subjugation necessarily play significant roles in the world. Adichie, therefore, aims to battle stereotypes of women.

Many of the writers have written analytical articles on the representation of violence such as how religious hegemony silences characters; discovery of women's voices; measures women take to free themselves from male perpetuated injustices; the need to free oneself from dictatorship; and the legacy of colonialism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. However the issue of violence on women and its effects to characters has not received as much critical attention hence allowing me to conduct this research. There is a need to critically analyse

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the extent to which the novel not only represents violence on women but also gives it prominence as a dominant theme.

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