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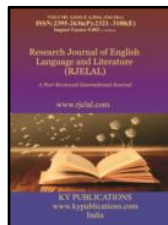
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## OPPRESSION OF WOMEN: POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

C. BIBIN SAM<sup>1</sup>, G. DANISH S. GEORSHIA<sup>2</sup>, M. REMYA<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,3</sup>Research Scholar, M.S University, Tirunelveli

<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar, Scott Christian College, Nagercoil



### ABSTRACT

African women writers have explored the subjugation of women in their societies in variety of ways. They have spoken for the oppressed groups in theory, and in creative works. Adichie is one among the writers, who has been engaged in centering women issues in her works. Through her works she gives voice to the voiceless people. In most of her works, Adichie has shared her experiences of being an African feminist and her views on gender construction and sexuality. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores domestic violence and the role of women in the context of a patriarchal society. Women's struggle emerges as the dominant theme in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. This novel shows how women have to struggle tirelessly to achieve the desired freedom from the clutches of tradition, socio-political and economic disempowerment of women as well as from male oppression.

Women are an integral part of human civilization and there is no general development of a society or country without an active participation and uplift of women. Though the status of women is different from culture to culture and changes from age to age, the truth is that women have never been considered equal to men. They have always been victims of male domination and oppression and treated like beasts of burden and objects of pleasure. From the past, men have looked down upon women as the weaker sex and treated them as their inferiors and slaves.

Oppression of women is one of the important aspects of postcolonial theory. Generally women are exploited and faced oppression every day. The root of the women's oppression lies in the division of society into classes. In the male dominated society, women have fewer legal rights and career opportunities than men. Discrimination against women has become customs passed from generations to generations. The society regards

women as inferior, trivial, unimportant, and peripheral. Discrimination against women is the attitude and beliefs in relation to the female gender that they are less important, such beliefs and attitudes are of society nature and do not normally carry and legal consequences.

Generally African women suffer due to their colour and also as the weaker sex. All over Africa, women are treated as subaltern. They have undergone physical, sexual, mental and verbal abuses. In Africa, many cultural practices are against women. When a girl child is born in a family, she is told that she is just a tool for men. Later when she is grown up she is married to a man. Women are beaten by their husbands and always blamed for not been able to give birth to children. Female children are not always given the best upbringing. They are mostly trained in the kitchen and not allowed to go school. Male children are brought up well because they are believed to carry their family names from generation to generation. In Africa, women are

oppressed at the hands of whites as well as black men.

Africa has the highest rate of domestic violence against women. Sexual assault is the most common kind of violence experienced by women. Everyday women are sexually harassed, abused, raped and psychologically tortured at home, workplace and society. It is a great tragedy that for most women that violence starts at home. Literature has always been a great tool in exploring the gender relations and gender discrimination. Women are silenced in every part of life. Her voice turns voiceless.

African women writers have explored the subjugation of women in their societies in variety of ways. They have spoken for the oppressed groups in theory, and in creative works. Adichie is one among the writers, who has been engaged in centering women issues in her works. Through her works she gives voice to the voiceless people. Adichie is against gender discrimination. In one of her interviews in TEDxEuston conference, she says, "I am angry. Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. We should all be angry. Angry has a long history of bringing about positive changes, but in addition to being angry."

In most of her works, Adichie has shared her experiences of being an African feminist and her views on gender construction and sexuality. Some of her novels remain incomplete Mullan says: "Few novels are complete without revelations. There are the moments when the surface of things suddenly changes meaning, when what we have already shifts its significance" (172).

. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores domestic violence and the role of women in the context of a patriarchal society. Women's struggle emerges as the dominant theme in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. This novel shows how women have to struggle tirelessly to achieve the desired freedom from the clutches of tradition, socio-political and economic disempowerment of women as well as from male oppression.

*Purple Hibiscus* depicts the contrasting ideas of silence and resistance overlapping and intertwined in the lives of Kambili, Jaja and their mother, Beatrice. Though they begin their journey

as voiceless individuals, but all of them, gradually, find their voice through resistance in their own different ways. In one of the reviews, Claire Hayes says, "Adichie's love of her homeland shines through every page, as too does her awareness of its many shortcomings. She writes of places she knows intimately and it shows; the university town of Nsukka...where Adichie herself grew up. "The issue of Patriarchal oppression is highlighted through the character of Eugene, who subjugates his own family members through constant violence and pressure. However, a major part of the narration recounts the phase of silence. The victimized characters such as Kambili, Beatrice and Jaja are silent spectators of their own exploitation. Moreover, their domestic world is filled with deep silence literally as well as metaphorically. Kambili describes the abundant silence that runs in every part of their family life: "Our steps on the stairs were as measured and silent as our Sundays: the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch...the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterward. Even our family time on Sundays was quiet..." (31).

This superficial silence actually suggests an inner helplessness of Beatrice and her children. Beatrice is depicted as a submissive wife who silently suffers her husband's constant atrocity without any resistance. However, Beatrice can be seen as a victim of a larger patriarchal society rather than merely a victim of a chauvinist husband.

The novel is set in the patriarchal setup in Enugu, a city in postcolonial Nigeria. Gender based violence runs deep in the novel. Beatrice is the mother figure in the novel. She represents the terrible condition of African women who lack economic independence. Thus, their life is exclusively controlled by men. She is portrayed as a weak, timid and submissive wife. She feels inferior to Eugene. She is most oppressed among all the female characters in the novel. Through the character of Beatrice, Adichie explores how wives are subjected by their husbands. Beatrice's world is exclusively controlled by her husband. She is not allowed to act according to her feelings and thoughts. In one particular incident, when Beatrice and her family visit father Benedict after a Sunday

service. Beatrice is feeling sick and thinks to wait in the car but Eugene compels her to accompany him to the priest house.

'Let me stay in the car and wait, *biko*,' Mama said, learning against the Mercedes. "I feel vomit in my throat".

Papa turned to stare at her. I held my breath. It seemed a long moment, but it might have been only seconds.

'Are you sure you want to stay in the car?' Papa asked.

Mama was looking down; her hands were placed on her belly, to hold the wrapper from untying itself or to keep her bread and tea breakfast down. 'My body does not feel right,' she mumbled.

'I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car.'

Mama looked up. 'I'll come with you. It's really not that bad.'(29)

The above incident clearly portrays how Eugene disregards the feelings of Beatrice. She has to obey her husband and has no other choice of her own. At home, she has no freedom of choosing curtains to hang on the windows of the family mansion. "Kevin brought samples for Mama to look at, and she picked some and showed Papa, so he could make the final decision" (192). Here, her indecision confirms the marginal position in her family.

African women are the products of multiple subjugations, such as Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neocolonialism, racism and gender imperialism, etc. Eugene is a typical byproduct of colonial influence and ideas that shaped him to be an extreme Catholic who exploits and brutalizes his own family. Eugene is a husband of Beatrice. He is a domestic bully and rude patriarch. He is a wealthy businessman and strict authoritarian whose strict adherence to Catholicism overshadows his paternal love. He forms schedules for Kambili and Jaja. He often punishes them. The children are afraid of him and not ready to speak in the presence of Eugene. Eugene often punishes his wife, Beatrice and his children, when they fail to live up to his high standards. The narration of Eugene beating his wife and daughter early on the Sunday morning in the beginning of a novel is a dramatization of the

atmosphere that compels muted interactions in the home. It also initiates the air of domestic violence.

Eugene is a prominent figure, who owns several factories. He publishes the Pro-democracy newspaper *The Standard* and is respected by his priest Father Benedict as well as Ade Coke, his editor. He generously donates to his children's school and is considered as a good man in the community however he is a dominating father and husband to his family.

Adichie presents Eugene as a symbol of patriarchal dominance. Eugene's wife, Beatrice leads a life of servitude while his children, Kambili and Jaja, live in fear of him. He is presented as a powerful dominant figure in the family. The first encounter with him is on the first page of the novel, at the moment of crisis as he reacts to his son's refusal to go to communion.

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étagère*. We had just returned from church. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change.(3)

The dictatorial Eugene rules his home with brutal norms. Living under him is itself is a great struggle for his family members. The children are equally speechless by their father's hard heartedness. They are extremely careful not to disturb him. Eugene dominates his family to the point that they are carried out to be silent. In this novel, Kambili and Beatrice become voiceless victims.

Eugene is portrayed as a violent figure from the beginning of the novel. He is 'a ticking time bomb' who crushes anyone in his path. The one who suffers the most is Kambili. Kambili's disempowerment affects her socially, leaving her unable to communicate with anyone other than herself. Her attempt at finding a place among others leaves her unsure and nervous. She is unable to speak 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 insult her for being a backyard snob she does not reveal her fear. She is not allowed to hang around with her friends after school. If she is late she is beaten. Because of her inability to make her tongue function in school she is labeled as 'backyard snob'. To make matter worse, she dashes off to her father's car as soon as the school bell rings. She does not exchange pleasantries with her classmates before she is driven home. This makes her classmates to see this as aristocratic arrogance. They are unaware that her family is dictated and regulated by her father.

Domestic violence is the most common form of gender abuse in *Purple Hibiscus*. Beatrice experiences this abuse in the hands of her husband. She endures physical battering in the hands of Eugene the only proofs for his physical battering is the "Jagged scar on her forehead", the swollen eye and the polished figurines on the étagère (15). It is ironical that in the face of the constant brutality of her husband, Beatrice validates his action as something normal and hence, acceptable. She fails to recognize the power of the resistance. In fact, she feels a sense of gratitude towards her husband for not bringing a new wife even after several miscarriages: "The members of the Umunna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else... But your father stayed with me, with us..." (20). However, Adichie attempts to push Beatrice from the margin to the centre by entrusting her with the final act of self-declaration.

Beatrice is a resilient and obedient character. Eugene's brutal beatings and sexual abuse towards his wife cause her to abort her pregnancy on a number of occasions. It leaves her body constantly weak. She conveys her experiences to Auntie Ifeoma, her sister-in-law, who lives in Nsukka:

'I got back from the hospital today. The doctor told me to rest...' 'You know that small table where we keep the family bible, *nne*? Your father broke it on my belly.'... 'My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it. 'Mama shook her head slowly. A thin line of tears crawled down her cheeks.... (248)

In Eugene's treatment of his wife there is an underlying sexism. When Mama tells Kambili she is pregnant, she mentions that she miscarried several times after Kambili was born. Within the narrative of the novel Mama loses two pregnancies at Papa's hands. These miscarriages are caused due to Papa's beatings. When she miscarries, Papa makes the children say special prayers for their mother's forgiveness. Even though it is Papa's mistake, he blames it as Mama's fault. Mama believes that she cannot exist outside her marriage. Adichie, through the character of Beatrice tries to convey how a family appears to be disempowered and subordinate the married women.

Beatrice honestly plays her social responsibilities well even though she is brutally abused by her husband. She remains in the marriage for the sake of her children. She serves her husband and children dutifully as a wife and a mother. Kambili observes that she always plaited her hair on Sundays. In one scene the narrator observes:

It was at my study desk when Mama came into my room, my school uniforms piled on the crook of her arm. She placed them on my bed.... 'Thank you, Mama, I was about to bring them in,' I said, getting up to fold the clothes. It was not proper to let an older person do your chores, but Mama did not mind; there was so much that she did not mind. (19)

The family is always expressing nervous moments due to paternal brutality. Eugene is always in the dominant position and the others in the family are silent or talk with suppressed voices.

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