

**STRATEGICAL SYNERGY FOR RESTYLING THE STEREOTYPES: DISCUSSION  
OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

Dr. Sakunthala A.I.  
Associate Professor of English  
MPMM SN Trusts College  
Shoranur, Palakkad, Kerala  
[pgtsaku@gmail.com](mailto:pgtsaku@gmail.com)

**Abstract**

*Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practises and as a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. The inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but social, not pre-ordained but created by men so that they retain power. Women all over the world, like the colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of the other, marginalised and in a metaphorical sense colonised by various forms of patriarchal domination as they share with the colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. Religion, family, education and knowledge systems are all social and cultural structures that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. Cultural texts naturalise this oppression of women through their stereotypical representation of women as weak, docile, irrational, vulnerable procreative machine. The present study analyses the feminine discourse in the novels of Chimamanda Adichie from Nigeria. Chimamanda in her magnum opus Purple Hibiscus demonstrates how the insults and humiliations suffered by the African women effected in their metamorphosis from the sober, dependent, muted and mutilated psyche into bold, free and independent beings. The paper also aims to state that a change in attitude in the mindset of the society in general and the men folk in particular, is the need of the hour so that these subalterns will be granted the needed space to break their cocoon of fear, low esteem and stifling diffidence and to ascertain their dignity, individuality and their right to voice their minds.*

**Keywords:** Stereotypes, Repression, Metamorphosis, Mutilated psyche, Stifling diffidence

Exploitation or oppression of the weaker by the stronger is as old as mankind itself. The history of the world has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like the exploiters and the exploited, the coloniser and the colonised and the powerful and the powerless. The discriminating social sanctions allocated a forced silence and segregated the exploited/colonised as the powerless/marginal dwellers. The enforced slumber

that benumbed their souls could not hold its sway for ever. The awakening of their conscience compelled them to break the boundary and raise the voice of protest against the dehumanising efforts of the exploiter/coloniser.

The historical subjugation of peoples based on their race and caste assumes a further paradigm of gender discrimination when the women struggle for identity and respect not only against the respective supremacists who have historically exploited them sexually but also against the men of their own groups who often fail to acknowledge their rights and contributions in the struggle against oppression.

Women, all over the world, like the colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of the 'Other', 'marginalised' and in a metaphorical sense 'colonised' by various forms of patriarchal domination as they share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. There is 'double colonisation' for women as women are subjected both to general discrimination as colonial subjects and specific discrimination as women. The world of women, as Simone de Beauvoir observes in the *Second Sex*, "is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated by the male universe; high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that block her way"(Beauvoir 325). They are cut off from the mainstream of power and privilege. Though they cry out in agony, in anguished voices, they remain unheard. The dominant discourse does not provide them the needed space to speak.

It is a fact that the marginalised cannot remain mute for long, they have to find their voice in order to find an outlet for their fears and tears, anger and anguish and thus register their existence. The voice resisting exploitation is fully aware of its own strength and dignity. There are many women writers who have portrayed their women not only as an ideal of oppression but also as model for resistance and freedom. Moreover they have learnt to raise their voice which was muted since ages by the dominant groups viz, the Men, the White people and the Upper class people in U.S.A. The focus of this paper is to elaborate how the women characters pictured by the Norwegian writer Chimamanda Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus* survive, despite immeasurable physical, mental and emotional trauma they undergo. Amidst unspeakable torment and isolation, their survival strategy rests only on an indomitable courage to fight all odds.

The creative art for the African writer is not just an art form that seeks to entertain the audience, it functions beyond that, that it is more of a social document geared towards the reconstruction of the socio-political configuration of the African people. The characters of Chimamanda Adichie in the selected novel are marginalised women lurking on the fringes of an oppressive white society who see life as a perpetual cycle of hope and despair. Their stories memorably bring out the strength and imagination of the women victimised by the male-oriented world.

*Purple Hibiscus* exposes the society which already permitted wife battering and violence against women in the name of family matters which only degraded the status of women further. The novel is full of incidents which shows the disrespect and prejudice Eugene, the protagonist Kambili's father display against women. The women in the novel are mistreated and even beaten up violently for petty reasons. They are expected to follow the patriarch, unquestioningly and the punishment is severe and brutal whenever they fail in their duties. The violence and inhuman treatment that the family members suffer in the novel seem exaggerated and unreal to some western readers. But these seemingly unreal situations are the fact of life for some people in certain societies which are even acceptable and usual there. Commenting on the situation, Fwangyil says:

The oppressive and dehumanising situations women undergo in this novel seem extraordinary, but these are real life stories that have been modified and recreated for the society's awareness. This novel, is in effect, a dramatic indictment of the oppressive attitude of men towards women and children that they are supposed to love and care for. It therefore has direct relevance to our contemporary society (Fwangyil 262-63).

Besides serving as a touching tale of modernity colliding with tradition, *Purple Hibiscus* is a discussion of third world feminism in Nigeria, commenting on the status of women and domesticity through the characters of Kambili's mother Beatrice and Aunt Ifeoma.

The novel is in the form of a powerful narration of a fifteen year old girl, 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" (Adichie16). 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. 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. 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. "I feel suffocated" (Adichie7). The members of Eugene's family do not have a 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 "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" (Adichie10).

In the novel, Beatrice, Eugene's wife is seen working for the family all the time. We see her unusually attracted towards some decorative figurines in her house which she frequently cleans. This is her way of suppressing her grief and helplessness. Polishing those figurines provides an outlet for her pent up grief. Her daughter Kambili also watches her mother helplessly cleaning the figurines. Kambili says:

She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple colour of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them (Adichie 11).

These figurines come out to be the symbols of her silence and endurance in the house. Like them, she endures every mistreatment in her own house without showing it to anyone. Until the end, she never complains about what her husband does to her. The helplessness of the traditional African woman is articulated very vibrantly when she remarks: "Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house?" (250) Her conviction of the above assertion makes her silence in the home even more galloping. Beatrice does not question Eugene's orders and authority even if obeying them is detrimental to her health. When Eugene scalds the children's feet for living with Papa Nnukwu, Beatrice only weeps and mixes salt with cold water to rub on their feet as a form of first aid. This incident portrays her as a docile, weak and helpless woman because she is economically and emotionally dependent on her husband.

Kambili's voice is used in telling us the events as they unfold. "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" (18). The breaking of the figurine is very significant in the novel in the sense that it has served as a source of consolation whenever Mama was heartbroke:

Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard sounds from their room, like something banged against their door. Her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs, but I knew she went downstairs when I heard the dining room door open. I would go down to see her standing by the étagère with a towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple colour of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them. (Adichie 18-19)

As the figurine is broken, one will wonder how she will deal with her emotions whenever there is a quarrel between them. It is obvious that Beatrice has no other choice but to look for means of dealing with the pains and the humiliation that she gets from her

husband. It is possible that Adichie makes the breaking of the figurine possible at the beginning of the novel in order to look for a way to stand up and fight for her right. Even when her daughter asked if she will replace it, she said no. This is a deliberate attempt by the author to make sure that the woman does not always look for means of hiding the humiliation and subjugation she passes through, but rather to look for a way to say no to all forms of ill treatment as evident in the novel. Beatrice is so much attached to her marriage with Eugene because she felt he is a source of spiritual, emotional and physical strength. She felt that Eugene would have listened to his kinsmen into taking another wife since she could only give birth to just two children. Leaving the marriage will make her an ingrate, so she stays against all odds to honour the man. It is obvious that their faith in the Catholic church made her believe that divorce is not an option in marriage but rather, marriage should be for better or worse. Even the African community where she comes from sees a 'good woman' as one who "suffers the effects of oppression, and neglect; and who must maintain a silence and passivity in order to remain good. Silence and passivity are two principal features of a good woman" (Udumukwu3) A striking balance between a 'good woman' and the 'real woman' can be likened to the character of Ifeoma who "even in the face of tyranny will not remain silent" (Udumukwu 3).

On another occasion when she expresses her reluctance to meet a priest because of her pregnancy, she is beaten up severely by Eugene. Her brutal beating causes her to miscarry on a number of occasions, leaving her body sapped of energy. Only once she recounts her experiences to Aunt Ifeoma, her sister-in-law. She says:

I got back from the hospital today. The doctor told me to rest but I took Eugene's money and asked Kevin to take me to the park. I hired a taxi and came here.... You know that small table where we keep the family Bible? ...(Eugene) broke it on my belly. My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St.Agnes Hospital. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save the pregnancy (Adichie248).

Though Beatrice undergoes series of humiliation, dehumanization, and denial from her husband, the novel showcases her as a good woman who tolerates everything from her husband and often suppresses her emotions thinking what the church and society will say. She felt that her marriage to Eugene is a favour considering the fact that he refused to listen to his kinsmen on the need to take another wife when she couldn't give birth after two children. One can ask whose fault it is, since it is obvious that she lost two pregnancies as a result of her husband's violent action and that she should not be blamed for her inability to give birth to more children.

Kambili, whom Eugene professes to love a lot, also gets similar treatment from him on numerous occasions. Silence in Eugene's house is so magnified to the extent that it could be heard. Kambili has no voice in that house and she never speaks loudly or laughs in the house.

As she does not mix with her classmates, everyone in her class calls her ‘backyard snob.’ They are unaware that her life is dictated and regulated by a schedule scrolled in her heart. Whenever she tries to speak, she starts having bubbles in her throat. Kambili behaves in this manner because her dictator father never gives her the freedom to feel free and express her mind openly. When Kambili tries to keep Papa Nnukwu’s picture against her father’s wish, this is what happens:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo and ...I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of painting.... Kicking. Kicking, Kicking....More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet(Adichie10-11).

In this novel, there are also women who work hard to debunk this age-long myth by asserting themselves and proving their mettle, regardless of the obstacles they face. The character of Aunt Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister, is completely opposite to Beatrice and Kambili. She faces a lot of accusations from the society when her husband dies in a car accident which she survives, and she is blamed for her husband’s death. But she is not bothered about this accusation, because she knows that she cannot “orchestrate a car accident in which a trailer rams into your husband’s car”(Adichie74).

The courageous, outspoken and assertive Ifeoma, shows her frustration and concern at Eugene’s fanatic urge to correct everything. She says that, “Eugene has to stop doing God’s job. God is big enough to do His own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene”(Adichie 95-96).She is also bold enough to tell Eugene the truth about his unfair treatment of their father. She takes over the role of Eugene in taking care of their father despite her lean resources. After Pa Nnukwu’s demise, Eugene refuses to organise a befitting burial for him because he was a traditionalist. Ifeoma, single-handedly ensures that their father is honourably buried despite being a woman in a patriarchal society. She asserts herself to prove that a woman can also take on a vital role when men abdicate their responsibilities.

Since her perception of religion is at variance with her brother’s, it is not surprising that the conflict between the two subtly detonates on the dining table. Eugene almost blinds his family with prayers during lunch. It is only the bold Ifeoma who is able to express the implication of lengthy prayers at meals: “Did you want the rice to get cold Eugene?”(Adichie35). It is made clear that Aunt Ifeoma is a symbol of feminism in this novel. She is a strong, independent, intellectual character teaching at a University and fighting for the empowerment of young Nigerians to have access to education.

In this novel, we can see that the subalterns have started asserting themselves through the process of resistance. They made their voices be heard. They have begun to move away from the periphery to the centre. They have started to rewrite their history and deconstruct the myths which so far subjugated their selves. Kambili's metamorphosis is complete before Aunt Ifeoma travels out of the country. To have pieced together the torn portrait of her grandfather destroyed by her father is a potent statement of her assertion of identity and an indication that she can transverse her limitations; at this point she is no longer a victim but an actor. Through this incident Kambili succeeds in breaking out of the social and religious silence of her earlier life. Kambili finally falls in love and her ability to express this emotion justifies the liberational quality of her voicing, which is self-defining and cathartic. It becomes glaring that Kambili has become mature and she is capable of independent thought and action.

Beatrice, an embodiment of the traditional African woman, who feels insecure outside Eugene's home and hides behind her husband's identity, resolves to carve a niche for herself finally by breaking away from that position. She decides to be bold and assert herself as the mother and wife in the home. In the beginning of the novel she was so meek and docile, but later "she did not lower her voice to a whisper... she did not sneak Jaja's food to his room, wrapped in cloth so it would appear that she had simply brought his laundry in"(Adichie257).She steps out of her enervating state, fractures the patriarchal social structure and demystifies the idealised traditional image of the African woman.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a feminist work that challenges the dehumanizing tendencies of the menfolk. 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 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 who empowered her. Beatrice struggles under the tortures imposed by Eugene and act as the proactive character who kills patriarchy (by poisoning her husband) purely by her very own decision. 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. The case of women joining together and empowering 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 success. 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.

The women in this novel emerge victorious, breaking domestic, social, religious, political and sexual shackles which so far have been like millstones weighing on them. They have transcended and transformed themselves from passive, battered, voiceless females into self-confident, assertive, modern women who compete with men in all spheres, who is ready to take her destiny in her own hands and to decide her own fate. “Women are in this changing role of social consciousness, refusing to be somebody else’s appendage”(Palmer39).

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