

Exploring the Role of Violence in Patriarchy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The present article deals with African Feminism and explores the role of domestic violence in patriarchy with special reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and account the responses of the major characters of the novel and that of the African women towards violence in domestic realms. Theorists from Africa like Gwendolyn Mikell blame colonization for worsening the condition of women. This perspective has also been explored her apart from the role of tradition of African society in maintaining male dominance. Reasons for women's subjugation to domestic violence have also been explored. This study includes the view of the author also which shall throw light upon the gravity of the issue.

Keywords: African Feminism, Domestic Violence, Female Subordination, Household, Socialization

Purple Hibiscus is the debut novel of the Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Winner of the 'Best First Book' award *Purple Hibiscus* has been often reviewed as an essentially feminist novel. In this novel Adichie has penned down the experience of a 15 year old girl, Kambili Achike, who is also the narrator of the story. *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age novel which illustrates Kambili's growth from a timid and self-conscious girl into a bold adolescent. She finds her voice. Through Kambili the novel offers a glance at an elite patriarchal Nigerian society.

Adichie is not only a celebrated writer but also a prominent African feminist she is quite an influential writer who is inspiring the world including common people and celebrities like the pop-star Beyonce. Adichie calls herself:

"A happy feminist who does not hate men and loves to wear lip gloss not for men but for herself."

This candid expression not only celebrates femininity but also manifests an important aspect of African feminism, that is, inclusiveness.

The idea of feminism in Africa was received with aversion as the African leaders perceived it as "externally generated" and "external manipulation". Feminism incorrectly came to mean a movement that was anti-male, anti-culture and anti-religion. African feminism not only attempts to eradicate this prejudice but also endeavors to include the exclusive experience of Continental African women who were referred to as "women of color" by Western feminists overlooking their cultural and historical nuances thus limiting their experience.

The validity of African feminism has also been challenged on the grounds of being just an outcome of exclusion of the experience of black women from the Western feminism. Still African feminism is relevant due to the narratives and experiences of African women. Gradually the image of Third World Women has emerged which, according to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, is an image of women "that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse". Mohanty argues that just as men reduce women as the other, the white women reduce the

women of Third World as the “other”. Thereafter they endeavored to save the Third World Women whose condition they assumed to be the same or worse than white women. Though male supremacy is the common factor in both feminisms, but it would be incorrect to stereotype African women as non-specific, homogenous and victimized beings that Western feminists must rescue. African women’s oppression is rendered diversified as it largely depends upon the historical, cultural and individual reasons. African women’s resistance to patriarchy and condescension together with the female integration within African societies gave rise to African feminism. Gwendolyn Mikell writes.

African feminism owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. It has largely been shaped by African women’s resistance to western hegemony and its legacy within African culture... The debates in many Western countries about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism are not characteristics of the new African feminism. Rather the slowly emerging African feminism is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many “bread, butter, culture and power” issues.

African feminism has been innovated by African women who reside on the African continent. It is not to be confused with Black feminism or African Womanism which is related to the cause of African Women in Diaspora, whose experience is addressed through intersection of race, class and sexuality.

In Africa, female subordination takes intricate forms grounded in traditional African culture which is patriarchal and polygamous. There are some specific patterns in the society which facilitate men to gain an upper hand on women. Though traditional societies had kinship structure which helped to attain balance between male and female positions, but the intervention of colonialism had destroyed this structure gradually leading to “benign female exclusion”; thus constituting a major assault on traditional gender relationships. A rigid demarcation between domestic and public life is one of them. Gwendolyn Mikell explains,

African women’s struggle against gender asymmetry and inequality is often described in terms of the relationship between public and private spheres or what we may call the “domestic versus public” distinctions in gender roles in Africa. Female subordination, often implemented through this domestic-public dichotomy tends to be linked with sex roles and relationships in most parts of the world.

Set in Nigeria Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* illustrates this “domestic – public dichotomy”. Though this novel has often been reviewed as the story of a young girl, Kambili, which is not incorrect altogether, but it is actually the story of Kambili’s father, Eugene Achike. Adichie herself states, “In 2003, I wrote a novel called *Purple Hibiscus* about a man who among other things beats his wife and whose story doesn’t end too well”.

Purple Hibiscus follows the story of Eugene Achike, a Charismatic and violent patriarch through feminist perspective, that is, through the eyes of Kambili. In public Eugene is generous and well respected; he owns a food factory and is an editor of a revolutionary newspaper which raises voice against military dictatorship taking over Nigeria: a humanist cause. At home, on the other hand, he is repressive and fanatically religious. He makes use of violence to control the behavior of his family members- his wife Beatrice, son Jaja and daughter Kambili. Kambili narrates that she was unaware of the atrocities her mother silently bears at the hands of her father,

Years ago before I understood I used to wonder why she polished (the figurines) each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door...there were never tears on her

face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she has rearranged them after she polished them.

Domestic violence is not a new happening in Africa. Families have often been the center of violent coercions due to the importance associated with the ideas of family and kinship in many African political systems. Anita Kalunta ascertains.

Africa has stood out as one of the regions in the world where adherence to cultural norms intersect with pervasive acts of degrading and injurious violent assaults on women and girls. This continent, which holds strong to its patriarchal cultural principles and practices, is known for its blatant display of violent abuse of women, including state sanctioned violence.

Emily S. Burrill uses the term “domestic violence” to indicate overwhelming controlling and punitive behavior whether physical psychological or emotional directed towards another member of a household as a means of establishing dominance. All such acts of violence are seen by those who inflict, endure or regulate them, who inflict endure or regulate them; like the Achike family; as being justified by a familial relationship.

In Africa marriage has different meanings for a women and a man. For a woman it is a coveted prize and for a man it is a facility. Adichie argues, “the language of marriage is often a language of ownership, not a language of partnership.”

The word “respect” is used for something a woman shows a man shows a woman. In patriarchy the institution and culture of the society reinforce the power of men over women. For this purpose women are confined to domestic realms. Burrill writes,

Men’s ideological perceptions of women frame them as supportive, nurturing, acquiescent, subordinate and familial, not as a political person and authority figure.

In a family all individuals have interconnected roles. The household members can be seen jockeying and renegotiating control in the family. Domestic violence is “a strategy employed by the household head to enforce his culturally sanctioned control over family members and dependents”. According to this theory Eugene Achike, who is the head of Achike family, uses the culturally sanctioned domestic violence to control and regulate his family. While exercising his power Eugene often goes to extreme. His savage beatings resulted into two miscarriages which Beatrice has to suffer. Beatrice slavishly accepts her husband’s abusive behavior. She defends him by relating his aggression to the tremendous pressure created by the murder of his co-editor. After her second miscarriage, Beatrice says,

Eugene has not been well. He has been having migraines and fever. He is carrying more than any man should carry. Do you know what Ade’s death did to him? It is too much for one person.

Beatrice’s standpoint complies with Burrill’s statement about the women in Mali: Wives were actively complicit in the maintenance of patriarchy- including domestic violence- as long as it remained within certain limits.

In Beatrice’s case it is obvious that Eugene is exceeding the limits. When Ifeoma, Beatrice’s sister-in-law disapproves Eugene’s behavior and warns her to run out of the burning house before the roof falls on your head, Beatrice cries, “Where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate their daughters even and not to bother paying a bride price?”

Through this statement Beatrice's compliance with emotional violence is depicted. She further exhibits a sense of gratitude towards Eugene for being loyal to her and not taking another wife. Her character reminds of Rosie from R.K Narayan's *The Guide* Who carries a sense of gratitude for Marco, her husband for taking her, a 'Devdasi' from lower caste, as his wife, though Marco could never ever respect or adore her. Beatrice's attitude goes along with what Deniz Kandiyoti termed as "Patriarchal bargain"- women engage in a bargain with patriarchy as a survival strategy. Beatrice has decided to endure as long as she receives favors from Eugene for being his wife. Through Beatrice and Eugene, Adichie has presented an example of the moral economy of marriage. Moral economy, as proposed by James Scott, is "a system of exploitation in which individuals accept exploitation in expectation of protection and subsistence". In this regard Burrill asserts,

In a variety of times and places moral economies of violence permitted men to use violence against their wives, parents, against their children, or household heads against their many dependents.

Female subordination is a cultural norm in Africa. Bride wealth exchange confers men full control over their wives. Wife battering is a common form of violence on women in Africa. Women, on the other hand, have been socialized to be 'likeable' and 'agreeable'. This outlook prevents women from taking their complaint to court. Scott London puts forward, Women's complaint of domestic violence leads to criticism in court-mandated meditation session regarding their lack of obedience to their husbands.

According to a report by CEDAW in 1998, the Minister of Women Affairs and social Development said that government has difficulty addressing the issue of domestic violence because women hardly report violence to the police as they fear facing reprisal from both the husband and wider family.

Domestic violence holds a place in household within an acceptable limit. When that limit is ever exceeded aggrieved individuals either seek justice in court or escape. Just as Beatrice finds her escape in polishing the figurines of her showcase, Battered women may have escaped from abusive households in some cases but they did not fundamentally challenge the bases of patriarchy and the logic of domestic violence.

While Beatrice's/women's subjugation to domestic violence can be associated with socialization and propriety, Eugene's /man's implication of the same is sometimes associated to "conditions of increasing shortages of materials, political and social resources" like the military coup in the novel, and sometimes to colonization.

Amina Mama, the Nigerian feminist scholar argues: Colonial states separate women and men into distinct, Eurocentric gender categories where by women were relegated to so called private spaces and restricted from movement and migration, while men were encouraged to work outside the home and engage with state tools in public ways under process of separation created a new domestic space for intimate violence.

Women's intrinsic link with the kin group and the domestic realm was perceived as a hindrance by men who consider it as sets of domestic interests and relationships that the new bureaucracy wished to transcend. With dissolving of kinship structure women were stripped off their kin's identity Polygamy was further discouraged. About this exclusion in the institution of marriage Gwendolyn Mikell writes, categorizing women as simply men's wives, thus separating women from the larger kinship group and creating vulnerability. In both domestic and economic realms, the inseparable process of colonial domination and capitalist development interacted with traditional culture to further distort sex roles by increasing the workload for women relative to men and also created the social dynamics of individualism

which clashed with the traditional communal compact and resulted in significant gender inequity for ordinary women.

Beatrice Achike is a dual-colonized woman. She is colonized as a woman and as a Eurocentric gender category which the state excludes benignly from the power hierarchy. The violence and abuse Beatrice suffers is two-fold – she suffers at the hands of her husband and that of her husband’s clan. During Christmas, Achike family used to visit Eugene’s homeland. Eugene throws a huge feast on the occasion in which the whole village was invited. It is a time when Eugene’s ‘umunna’ or the extended family gather and interact with each other. It’s a busy time for Beatrice for she herself prepares the dinner with other women of the village. Here she plays the ‘good wife material’ what Nigerians call ‘homely’. Festival is not a time for celebration or recreation for her as she has to perform her gender roles which leaves her fully exasperated. There’s no mention of Beatrice’s/women’s kinsmen in the novel which could have been if the novel be set in pre-colonial Nigeria. Beatrice stands alone as a woman who is completely separated from her kinship identity and interest. She bears emotional violence from Eugene’s ‘umunna’ who always insist him to take another wife as he is an ‘Omeolera’ and a man of his stature cannot have just two children. Beatrice has no role in decision making in her family.

Gender roles are not assigned for women only Burrill clarifies, Men and Women had discrete gendered task and responsibilities that defined the house hold. Husbands were required to provide for their wives and children’s subsistence, protection and propriety. Wives were required to perform domestic and sexual labor, work in the household’s fields for part of the day, and care for the children.

But in Patriarchy, nobody asks a man to do what is traditionally right. Eugene torments his wife and children physically, psychologically and emotionally. He doesn’t stand as a very successful father. Nobody could check him when he exceeds the limits. He claims to love his family but his “love sips” would burn their tongue. He is a strict disciplinarian and has framed time- table for each and every minute of the day including holidays. His intolerance towards sin leads him to punish his children promptly. He could flog them, scald their feet and break their bones. He never fails in punishing them even after days and weeks. However he always feels guilty after punishing them. Kambili sets forth,

His eyes crumpled; his eyelids sagged “Why do you walk into sin?” he asked... Papa crushed Jaja and me to his body. “Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?” he asked examining our faces... It was the way Papa shook his head when he talked about liking sin, as if something weighed him down, something he could not throw off.

At times Eugene appears to be confined within the narrow cage of masculinity trying to be – what Nigerians call- a ‘hard man’. But all the punishments could inculcate only fear in the minds of his wife and children; they fail to bring about any reformation. Jaja’s act of defiance proves it. Eugene fails to realize that he is bringing up his children into socially handicapped person. Kambili is often dumb folded. Jaja feels that his younger cousins Obiora is more mature than him.

Etiene G Krug reports, Children who witness martial violence are at a higher risk for a whole range of emotional and behavioral problems, including anxiety, depression, poor school performance, low self-esteem, disobedience, nightmares and physical health complaints.

While Eugene uses the “strategy at domestic violence” to enforce his “culturally sanctioned control” over his wife and children, his sister Ifeoma, on the other hand adopts a liberal and tolerant approach in maintaining discipline in her family. Ifeoma is a university professor and in charge of her three children – Obiora, Amaka and Chima.

Not long before the novel opens, she has lost her dear husband; she lives in a small flat and provides for her children with her meagre salary. Like Eugene, Ifeoma is also affected by the military coup- the political pressure apart from emotional and financial crisis- her promotion is delayed, she doesn't get her salary on time, she is also harassed by the army men who threaten her to leave the place as she is not in favor of the military dictator. She is likely to move to America soon. She is further accused by her husband's 'umunna' for causing his death and hiding all his money. But she is not cowed by such false allegations and always takes her children to visit her husband's homeland, uncertain, how long she will be able to continue these visits over such repressive behaviour. In spite of all the shortages, Ifeoma is able to provide a healthy environment for her three children where they grow, learn, laugh, discover and explore. At times she use to look at them in a "proud-coach-watching-the-team way"

Ifeoma further looks after her senile father (who is referred to as Papa Nwukwu in the novel) during his last days and performs his funeral rites after his death which was financially aided by Eugene. What Ifeoma/daughter did was actually the obligations of Eugene /son. The siblings share the same faith but Eugene's fanaticism leads him to break family bonds with his father, and to eschew his duties. Papa Nwukwu's jockeying statement to Ifeoma that "women does not count" echoes the traditional belief of African society; still he acknowledges his daughter's worth by saying,

Where would I be today if my 'Chi' had not given me a daughter?

Purple Hibiscus presents an example how a man and a women act differentially under pressure. While man/Eugene resorts to abuse, woman/Ifeoma manages stress and guides her family like a coach. There is a stark contrast in the behaviors and attitudes of these two.

The fact that exploitation and suppression of women can reduce them to mental wrecks cannot be denied. In Africa there is a history of violent abuse as a defense in cases where women killed their abusive husbands. In the 1970s "battered wife syndrome" became a central element of the women's movement which shifted the problem towards judicial spheres. Beatrice too ends up in similar fate. She starts poisoning Eugene who finally dies. She shows signs of mental deterioration. Unfortunately Jaja takes the accusation of killing his father and gets arrested and is sent to jail. Beatrice is left alone with her daughter Kambili; both struggling for Jaja's release and well being and hoping that he will by and by be released.

Violence on women by men-folk leads to the collapsing of the institution of family. Burrill claims,

....violence within the domestic sphere continues to take its toll on women, children, men and society as a whole.

Physical trauma, psychological fears and control, according to WHO reports, leads to mental health problems which further leads to homicide, suicide and other adverse health outcomes.

Eugene and Beatrice both fall victim to patriarchy - a system which allows the use of domestic violence through the institution of family to reinforce the power of men over women. This particular type of violence is not only accepted but justified by both the oppressor and the oppressed: by man and woman, as a cultural norm through the process of socialization. Domestic violence becomes a signatory authority of the head of the household, who is, of course, a male, to establish male dominance. It is the extreme form of condescension towards women. Women too comply with the violent behaviour of their husbands. Even when domestic violence exceeds its agreed limits, women are reluctant to raise their voice for the fear of reprisal and public criticism. They either suffer throughout their life or commit lethal acts like Beatrice.

Beatrice is an elite woman. Like the other African women who have been separated from their kin's group, she faces an identity crisis which makes her vulnerable to intimate violence. Strict gender roles of traditional African society and the colonial policy of "benign female exclusion" resulted into domestication of woman. For ages woman have been confined within domestic realms that they find it difficult to bring their private problems into public arena, and tends to keep their problems within their domestic spheres. Domestic violence is a negotiation within a household. But domestic violence after exceeding a certain limit can lead into devastating consequences.

Through the three major characters of the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, namely Eugene, Beatrice and Ifeoma, Adichie challenges the logic of domestic violence. She asserts that feminism could reform the society as a feminist is. A man or a woman who says, "yes there is a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better." Both men and women must do better to make the world a better place to live in.

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