

Transformation of Women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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ABSTRACT

The works of third - generation Nigerian women writers present female characters challenging two forms of domination, one continued by the father figure and the other by the husband who continues the practice of subjugation and female subordination. They have to suffer the after effects of colonial rule and the patriarchal norms of their culture. This research presents the transformation of female characters from a state of voiceless to assertiveness. To reach in that stage they had to sacrifice a lot in their life.

1. Introduction

This novel is presented from the point of view of Kambili Achike, aged fifteen and is essentially about the disintegration of her family and her struggle to grow into maturity. This research attempts to portray the growth of women characters. It is the training and the living atmosphere that forms the personality of persons. Initially Beatrice's family is submissive whereas Aunt Ifeoma and her children are expressive. The protagonist in this novel is Kambili, a fifteen year old girl. Her father Eugene is rich, rigid, authoritarian, a religious fanatic and an unpredictable patriarch. Eugene's expectations from the children are very high. He says "God has given you much, he expects much from you"(47). He is a perfectionist and wants them always to be first in school. Once when she scored second position in the class, Sister Clara, had written in her progress card "Kambili is intelligent beyond her years, quiet and responsible" (38). The principal, Mother Lucy, wrote, "A brilliant, obedient student and a daughter to be proud of" (39). Yet Papa is not satisfied with this, he wants his children to be at the top in class always.

At home everything revolves around Eugene's rigid and carefully mapped out schedule which leaves no room for idleness or personal free time. Even when Kambili goes to her aunt's house at Nuskka Papa gives a schedule to her and asks her to follow that. Compounding the issue of not being heard, Kambili suffers from an inability to communicate what she truly feels. "I meant to say I am sorry. Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, I am sorry your figurines broke, Mama" (10). It reveals her fear of implicating her father in his acts of violence. She is unable to communicate what she wants to convey when talking with classmates or her cousins. At school when Kambili is unable to express herself, she falls silent. One day at the time of school assembly Kambili is called by their school principal, Mother Lucy to start the pledge. It is the first time that she is called. Kambili opens her mouth, even though she knows the words, they do not come out. Hewett in her article *Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation* points out; "Her father's patriarchal rule has subsumed her individual identity almost entirely, and his abuse rends her from her own ability to speak" (85). At other moments she struggles to speak, and then fear

often prevents her from speaking the truth, still she does manage to talk. What she says, is often misunderstood by others.

With other people, Kambili often struggles because she does not know what she would say, or how she would say it, if she could say anything. She does not know what she feels or who she is, she is very much concerned with pleasing her father. When she says something, if it wins his praise, she feels complete, and his approval affects her physically. When he holds her hand, she feels "as though my mouth were full of melting sugar" (26); when he gives her tea, she feels "the love burn my tongue" (31). Even thinking of his absence causes her throat to tighten in fear (108). Her father is a strict disciplinarian. There are mainly three events in which Eugene punishes his daughter. Each time the intensity of the punishment also increases in an ascending manner. On the Sunday immediately after Christmas, before going to church because of her menstruation, Kambili has cramps and is made to break the Eucharistic fast. Meanwhile Papa comes in unexpectedly and, not listening to the excuse, flogs all of them with his belt. He always wants to exert control over people and situations. He rules his family with muscle power. For example, he unleashes his anger on Kambili, for daring to stay with Papa Nnukwu without informing Eugene, who incidentally is Eugene's father; hence her grandfather who is also a traditionalist. For Eugene, he is a heathen. When Eugene discovers that Kambili and Jaja stayed in the same house with his heathen father Pa Nnukwu during their visit to Aunt Ifeoma, he boils water in a kettle and scalds their feet with it. He tells to them, "You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk into it" (194). Living with Pa Nnukwu, for him, is tantamount to willful evil; by staying in his presence children have desecrated themselves. For this Kambili is tortured by her father. He is a sadist. While pouring hot water on her feet he is crying. Kambili suffers excruciating pain; he says "That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet" (194).

Excruciating pain dissolves Kambili's words, an experience shared by many victims of torture. At the moment of torture, Kambili is not conscious of her words or of herself;

she is fully subjected to her father's power. The effects of his abuse enter into her sense of herself and the world. She believes that, she deserves to be punished; her father tortures her for her own good, that he cannot be wrong because he is like God, and unlike other mortals. While leaving for Enugu, Amaka, Aunty Ifeoma's daughter, gives Kambili the painting of Pa Nnukwu as a parting gift. This painting symbolizes the growth of Kambili's world to include her forbidden grandfather, aunt, cousins, and Father Amadi. Back at home; this picture is hidden from her father. One day Jaja enters Kambili's room and, together they take and stare at the painting, then Eugene happens to enter the room, snatches the painting, and tears it up. Then Kambili, in order to try to protect it from destruction "dashes to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as if saving them would mean saving Papa Nnukwa...I lay on the floor curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in my *Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools*" (210). Here she displays a strong form of resistance. Her action shows that she begins to question her father's omnipotence. At this time Kambili suffers a brutal attack from her father:

Here we see her refusal to forget what she has seen: a different way of living, a family life which she "had never had, would never have" (210). Here we witness the culmination of Eugene's brutality towards his daughter. Even Mama admits that Papa "has never punished her like this before" (214). As a result of this attack Kambili remains unconscious for some days and is hospitalized. Life under her father had not only prevented her from speaking her mind but also from feeling her own body. As a teenage girl, this is perhaps the most unpardonable abuse the father could have inflicted on her. Teenage years are very important for people because it represents their transition from childhood to adulthood. Eromosele in her article *Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* remarks; "The sexual hormones at this time work overtime, and it is the sole privilege of the teenager to feel the rush of these hormones and deal with them. Success or failure in this very fundamental issue goes a long way in determining the sexual and/or mental health of an individual later in life" (99). What Papa Eugene denied Kambili is a chance to recognize her sexuality, a chance to realize that she is female and at some point or the other may have an interest in a male. After the mass on the Pentecost Sunday Eugene, as usual wants to pay a visit to the parish priest Father Benedict with his family. At this time Mama is pregnant, tired and not in a position to walk, so when they are moving to the priest's residence Mama asks for permission to sit in the car. Papa is infuriated. He says "I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car" (29). Mama accompanies them. Back at home that day Eugene is infuriated and Mama is physically tortured.

At the time of receiving punishment for bringing Papa's portrait home, Kambili "lay on the floor, curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus" (210). After this incident, the recognition of their mother's inability to take action, stirs her towards mobility. When Kambili regains consciousness in the hospital, she resents her mother not only for her inability to stop her father's abuse but also for the excuses she creates for him afterwards. Kambili "wished I could get up and hug her, and yet I wanted to push her away, to shove her so hard that

she would topple over the chair ... it was hard to turn my head, but I did it and looked away" (213-214). A change is reflected in Kambili's action as she turns her head away from her mother. Trousers are culturally seen as men's clothes in traditional African societies. Eugene ensures that Kambili wears long skirts and cuts her nails to a chaffing shortness. When she goes to Nsukka to visit Ifeoma's family, she experiments with lipstick for the first time and borrows a pair of shorts from Amaka to use for exercise. Although she feels odd, she eventually adjusts to her new physical appearance. Ifeoma and Amaka continue to wear lipstick and trousers in spite of Eugene's assertion that he will only assist them when they stop wearing such clothes. It is the personal maturity and evolution that she achieves from Nsukka that enables Kambili to transform from an initial mixed attitude of hatred/love towards her mother, into a protective role. When her mother is devastated, she communicates to Ifeoma and Kambili that she has had a miscarriage because of Eugene's beating. As a result of all these incidents, Kambili experiences a profound personal transformation. After her stay at her aunt's house, she becomes more mature, understanding, communicative, and assumes responsibilities when situations arise. Now Kambili shows independence in making her own choices. Kambili asserts herself after her father's death by ensuring that the various business concerns of the family are well organized. She knows that the responsibility of making decisions for the family lies with her because of her brother's imprisonment and the mother's mental instability. Initially, she seems weak and incapacitated, but is later able to manage the affairs of her home.

Another form of patriarchal dominance presented in this novel is based on the husband-wife relationship. Beatrice, Kambili's mother embodies a battered wife who, initially submissively accepts her fate because she is unable to think that others can exist for her. This is the reason why she always tries to keep her home calm, to handle her husband's difficult character or to control her son when he tries to rebel against his authoritative father. In her desire to maintain family harmony, Beatrice asks her children to be affectionate to their father who, at times, causes them so much physical and psychological pain: "Mama told Jaja and me often to remember to hug Papa tighter, to let him know we were there, because he was under such pressure" (208). Women's subjugation and marginalization in the African public life assumes different forms. Loomba in her book *Colonialism/postcolonialism-the New Critical Idiom* observes; "Colonialism intensified patriarchal oppression, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more tyrannical at home." (142). It is evident in the case of Eugene. Papa's obstinate attitude is dangerous to Mama's health. Many times Beatrice endures physical battering in the hands of Eugene yet, she never tells it to anyone. The only available proof for his physical violence is the 'jagged scar on her forehead' (15), the swollen eye and the fact that she polishes the figurines on the étagère after every episode of beating.

Beatrice's universe is limited to her family and it causes her to live through her children rather than have a life of her own. Always Beatrice's actions are under Eugene's control and

she would never dare to do anything without the knowledge of her husband. She is usually unable to react to her husband's violence because, her submission to her husband is so deeply internalized that she does not even imagine that she has the capacity to resist. Ada in her article *A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus* states; "Early marriage, abusive relationships, violence and fear of poverty make women susceptible in marriage. They lack the courage to say 'NO' to an abusive and oppressive husband" (267). Although Beatrice's family background is not revealed in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is clear that she is afraid of a life outside marriage. She tells Ifeoma after another episode of Eugene's brutal beatings: "Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me where would I go? ... Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many told him to impregnate them even, and not bother paying a bride price?" (123). Beatrice possesses a reverential attitude towards her husband. Eugene's brutal beatings and sexual abuse have caused her to abort her pregnancy on a number of occasions; leaving her body constantly sapped of energy. The last heinous act of Eugene against his wife is breaking a table on her belly, thereby terminating her six-week pregnancy: This is how Beatrice recounts this experience to Auntie Ifeoma, her sister-in-law, who lives in Nsukka;

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, *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. (248)

Here we get the impression that he is blind about his actions. Kehinde in her article *Rulers Against Writers, Writers Against Rulers: The Failed Promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction* remarks; "This incident transforms Mama into a violent person as revealed in the event that unfolds later" (47). This last physical and psychological abuse of Beatrice by her husband causes her to take drastic actions which lead to Eugene's ineluctable end. Eugene is not an ideal Christian husband he is not a good example of what a father should be. Amaka in her article *Women's Struggles and Independence in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Half of a Yellow Sun* points out; "He is, instead, a sick, demented man who is caught between the archaic African culture which permits wife battery and the true Christian doctrine which does not" (83). Throughout most of the text Beatrice is an absent mother. She accepts her husband Eugene passively in silence. She loves and respects him so much that she even justifies Eugene's physical violence against herself and her own children, explaining such behavior as the result of external causes. One of these examples is seen when Beatrice is so heavily battered by her husband that she is seriously wounded and must be taken to hospital. In this situation she justifies the actions of Eugene saying it as a reaction caused by the stress and pressure Eugene is going through since his editor and friend, Ade Coker, was murdered: "Eugene has not been well. He has been having migraines and fever," she said. "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" (250).

We find other examples of Beatrice's passiveness in her lack of reaction towards Eugene's severe physical beating of her daughter Kambili, which takes the girl to hospital, or when her husband burns their children's feet with boiling water for their disobedience. In both these situations Beatrice tries to comfort her children, to reduce the seriousness of these actions but she never reacts. This attitude of Beatrice causes to form in Kambili a mixture of contradictory emotions of love and rejection towards her mother that she does not fully understand. It is very clear in her reaction to her mother when she is hospitalized. After this incident Beatrice does not remain the same, she feels the quest for emancipation and this leads her into conniving with her house help, Sisi, to poison Eugene's tea with rat poison in small doses and eventually, it leads to his death and a perceived collapse of his overbearing tyranny. In *'Purple Hibiscus'* Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's only sibling is painted in our mind as an extremely intelligent, assertive, self-sacrificing widow who also, is a staunch defender of her honor and her family and is working as a lecturer at the University of Nigeria. She single handedly brings up her three children Amaka, Obiora and Chima. She makes up for what she cannot provide materially for her children by showering them with unconditional love, encouragement and attention. She is also bold enough to tell Eugene the truth about his unfair treatment of their father, Pa Nnukwu. 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 organize a befitting burial for him because he was a traditionalist. Ifeoma single handedly ensures that their father is honorably buried despite she, being a woman in a patriarchal Igbo society. Through her actions she proves that a woman can also take on a vital role when men fail to fulfill their responsibilities.

She is not willing to accept Eugene's conditional gifts which will reduce her financial difficulty. Auntie Ifeoma, undergoes severe emotional and psychological torture which a widow is subjected to as soon as her husband is no more. Auntie Ifeoma is criticized by her husband's family. She is accused of killing her husband and of, also, looting his money. Her flexibility helps her to overcome such accusations and the maltreatment she receives from her in-laws. She loves her homeland and wants to be there but when she realizes that there are no realistic options that would enable her to remain in Africa she decides to move to USA. In her life she is not afraid of decision making and does not believe that a woman's destiny must be necessarily united to that of a man. Having lost her husband in a ghastly motor accident, Auntie Ifeoma refuses to give herself up to another marital commitment. Once at the time of a friendly conversation with Beatrice Auntie Ifeoma tells her, "*Nwunye m*, sometimes life begins when marriage ends" (75). She decides to spend her remaining life with her children without a husband. The priority accorded to man in the culture is evident from the conversation between Beatrice and Auntie Ifeoma. Here Ifeoma, tells of six girls in her first year seminar class who are not married and yet schooling. This condition is in contrast to the 'usual' situation where men provide their wives with text books and other luxuries but in the

end, “when they graduate, their husbands own them and their degrees” (75).

In every sense, Auntie Ifeoma is a mother to the core. She manages her home in the best way that she can. Even though she is struggling due to the shortage of money she never depends on the wealth of her brother. She is content with her small salary. Oha in his article *Beyond the Odds of the Red Hibiscus* notices; “Even Kambili is surprised at the way she manages her home out of nothing. Her children are always happy and contented with whatever they are given” (206). Amaka is Auntie Ifeoma’s daughter, one of the strongest female voices in *Purple Hibiscus*. She refuses to take an English name for her confirmation because she sees no need to accept such colonial authoritarianism. She also is not forced to accept this necessity. Not even from Father Amadi who is their family friend. Amaka seems to be the most vocal of these characters: young, resilient, outspoken and uncompromising in the things that touch her African pride. Kambili describes her thus: “She walked and talked even faster and with more purpose than Auntie Ifeoma did” (78). She is a rare breed of the new generation of youths. She is creative, accommodating, honest, and outspoken and a dogged fighter. Even when Amaka leaves the country with her mother, she never stops her protests against those things she finds unpleasant in the Nigerian society. Kambili tells us that: “Amaka used to write to the office of the head of state, even the Nigerian Ambassador in America, to complain about the poor state of Nigeria’s justice system. She said nobody acknowledged the letters but still it was important to her that she do something” (300).

Under the rule of totalitarian dictatorship women suffer more. They are the primary victims always. During vacation time Mamma takes Jaja and Kambili to the market to get new sandals and bags. When they leave the market after shopping they happen to see a ‘woman lay in the dirt, wailing’ and soldiers around her and later Kambili, sees that “woman spit at a soldier. I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman’s shoulder. Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing” (44). During totalitarian rule corruption is prevalent everywhere. Once soldiers come to Auntie Ifeoma’s home at night and under the assumption that she is supporting the government they make the entire house a mess. Later, due to constant threat and loss of job she decides to leave Nigeria for the US. Finally she gets an American visa. At this time Aunt is describing the events that happened at the embassy to her children. There the officials issue visa based on their likes and dislikes. When Obiora asks, why do they refuse visa? She says “I don’t know. If they are in good mood, they will give you a visa, if not, they will refuse you...We are like footballs that they can kick in any direction they want to” (278).

Once to Ifeoma, Pa Nnukwu expresses regret for allowing Eugene to follow the missionaries. After following them now his son denies himself and his basic needs, then Ifeoma reminds him that she is also a beneficiary of the missionaries work in

Africa, but she has not abandoned him like Eugene. At this juncture, Pa Nnukwu tells her that ‘You are a woman. You do not count’ (83). He fails to recognize that achievements, whether attained by man or woman, are the same. The arrival of again Loomba observes; “colonialism eroded many matrilineal or woman-friendly cultures and practices, or intensified women’s subordination in colonized lands” (141). That we see in this novel Auntie Ifeoma always address Beatrice as ‘*Nwunye m*’ which means ‘my wife’. The idea behind it is that ‘it was not the family and not the man alone that married a wife’ (73). About this concept Eugene is in the opinion that it is the remnants of ungodly traditions and hence he opposes it. Beatrice is pleased with this pattern of addressing for she says, the way she addresses shows that Ifeoma accepts me.

In the novel the title *Purple Hibiscus* is a metaphor, Casellas in the edited work *The Grove Working Papers on English Studies* remarks; “a metaphor of the fact that the possibility of change and hope exists in any life despite difficulties or drawbacks” (139). The purple color in a hibiscus goes against nature and, yet one of Aunt’s friends succeeds in making it real. Jaja discovers his liking for gardening during his stay at his aunt’s home and decides to take cuttings from this original plant to his own house with the intention of planting them. Later this act becomes a symbol of his faith in the future.

2. Conclusion

To make the title of the novel true in the case of characters in this novel, even though Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja have to suffer a lot, the story ends with the final message that there is room for a better future, for laughter, dreams and hope. Soon Jaja will be released from the prison where he has gone after admitting the guilt of poisoning his father and Kambili feels strong, full of future aspirations and capable of making plans. All the past, the broken dreams, the paralysed existence of the family, because of the murder of the father and its consequences and the shrinking of Beatrice into her own invented world when she is not strong enough to cope with real life have come to an end. Now the family can hope for a promising future. We could think that the new Kambili is like the purple hibiscus because, here against all her trauma, she survives, personally overcoming the violent, tense and suffocating environment that she lives in. When we come to the final part of the novel Kambili, reassures her defenseless mother by a protective embrace. Thus finally Kambili the central figure in this novel is able to overcome all the difficulties in her life and is able to find a place for herself. She comes to experience the taste of freedom and there by self realization. She reaches to a stage where she is able to look after everything at home.

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