

# Breaking Bonds in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is a contemporary African work which earned fame internationally. Her works are appealing, powerful and related to women's emotional struggles to free themselves from male dominance and cruelty. She reveals negative effects on the well-being of female characters by the physical, psychological and mental abuse. She has declared herself a feminist and her writings provide a feminist interpretation of the archetypes, situations and representation. The symbolic traces in the characters result in the country's history and a ray of hope for the future. The novel offers audibility to an unheard voice of a black African female in a postcolonial context of political conflict and civil war. African history and cultural inheritance and western influences can be seen through female characters.

Adichie's females are very powerful in different roles and level of empowerment. The character analysis of the most submissive Kambili's mother and the most empowered Aunt Ifeoma and her daughter has done to provide a critical reading. The characters have a different level of empowerment and freedom but suffer from the patriarchy. The classification is difficult yet Adichie contributed in gaining power and self-consciousness to her female characters and oppose the patriarchy that holds them back whether in marriage, abusive males, religion, the leftovers of the colonial time or the Biafran War. This flexible approach of the female characters to the gender problem highlights the complexity of a feminist reading.

This paper aims to provide a feminist critical reading of Adichie's female characters and prove them to be archetypes of different realities concerning Nigerian women and symbols standing for the past and the future of Africa. It offers an insight of the historical roots of the main conflicts that Adichie's female characters suffer from and conclude with the pliability that exists in characters' approach to their problems and the opportunity of empowerment given as a ray of hope for the present and future. She gives a critical insight into the reality and the problems of gender prevailing in Africa. Katherine Frank in *Women without Men* establishes that there is a "historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society" (15). Mineke Schipper in *Mother Africa on a Pedestal* on the subjugation of females in Africa states that "the replacement of traditional ideas by Western ones has not proved to be a guarantee for the amelioration of women's position. On the contrary, they may have only served to strengthen ideas which many African creation and origin myths already contained." (37)

Kambili's mother (Mama), a central character is one of the disempowered female characters. She is a submissive wife, eager to please her husband and afraid of the consequences of disobeying him. She is a woman who knows and accepts the inferior position. She takes the

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role of housewife and upbringing children in her relationship and states very clearly the bounds that restrain her: “So you say. A woman with children and no husband, what is that? [...] A husband crowns a woman’s life, Ifeoma. It is what they want” (*PH*: 75). The lack of freedom and choice is highlighted in the case of Mama. When she denies her instinct of protecting children, allows her husband to punish them and exert his authority through violence, displays a very traditional concept of fatherhood. Its example is when Eugene throws a book at his son but it ends up hitting. Mama has no reaction to husband’s violent reaction.

The husband, Eugene is analysed as a dominant partner who has absolute control and rules everyone in the house. He studied in a Catholic school and suffered a very distinctive clash of cultures and religions. The Western influence driven by missionaries made him reject his original culture, beliefs and traditions. That’s why he broke ties with his father and represents him for non-Christian beliefs and is reflected when he decides to send Kambili and Jaja to his house to greet him: “I don’t like to send you to the home of a heathen, but God will protect you” (*PH*: 62) This rejection of his own African identity results in two sides: the one as a benefactor and political activist, and the other as abusive, unstable father and violent husband. Eugene is a symbolic figure of the absolute power exerted by men in Nigerian society, both in terms of politics and domestic. Mabura in *Breaking Gods* writes: “Eugene has also fallen prey to a deeper underlying and irreconcilable battle between his sexuality and Catholicism” (218). Eugene is also blamed for the wounds on his wife’s face: “Mama was at the door when we drove into our compound. Her face was swollen and the area around her right eye was the black-purple of an overripe avocado. She was smiling.” (*PH*: 190) These lines show an inability to stand up and revolt against her husband but smile as if nothing happened. But towards the end, Mama appears in Ifeoma’s house and tells Kambili about the mistreatment and the loss of her baby. This confession anticipates a change in Mama’s attitude which results in killing her husband.

Kambili’s aunt, Ifeoma’s empowerment and liberation have great symbolic meaning to critical feminist reading and in the process of Kambili’s growing up. Ifeoma is an independent woman who lives alone with her children and works at the university in Nsukka. Her daughter Amaka is the promise of female liberation. Her lifestyle and the freedom are enjoyed by Kambili and Jaja who rethink their own upbringing and then revolt against their father. Ifeoma is very conscious and unhappy with the treatment given at Kambili’s house. She even tries to convince Mama to leave Eugene for mistreatment and domestic violence. Ifeoma words helped Mama take her decision and fight her husband back. This revolt has a meaning of breaking bond which oppressed her and her children and chose to kill Eugene. The killing is interpreted as an act of a mature Africa breaking the chains of colonial rule, liberating from the struggles and civil wars that gained independence, a ray of hope. This results in Jaja’s jailed for the murdering his father due to failed attempts of postcolonial autonomy in Nigeria.

Adichie’s female characters cannot be differentiated by their level of empowerment, their behaviours and attitudes which show flexibility giving a message of freedom to Kambili or

Mama as contemporary African women. The process of Kambili's growing up can be seen through a relationship with her father, her mother, parents' relation and the domestic violence at her house. She idealizes Eugene: "That night I fell asleep hugging close the image of Papa's face lit up, the sound of Papa's voice telling me how proud of me he was, how I had fulfilled God's purpose for me" (*PH*: 52-53) and never questions his decisions and acts.

The strong belief of Eugene against his father was different from Kambili experiences. In her visit to grandfather, she unable to find weirdness and evil in him according to her father: "I had examined him that day, too, looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn't see any, but I was sure they were somewhere. They had to be" (*PH*: 63) Kambili's experiences attachment with her cousins or her grandfather changes her view. Ifeoma offers the freedom to Kambili and her brother, Jaja allows exploring themselves and the world in a more relaxed way than their father, who imposed rules in the house. Kambili's unconscious reactions and attitude are due to the impact of the free environment and the appreciation of family which was unknowingly desired.

Kambili has to face the same abusive environment and punishment at home after returning back. Eugene finds Amaka's painting of their grandfather in Kambili's bedroom and destroys it. Kambili lays on the pieces of the painting wanting to protect and the revolt started "something lost, something I have never had, would never have" (*PH*: 210). The painting was a symbol of a different life and freedom. Kambili puts up with a heavy-hitting which results in disrespect and soon Kambili and Jaja are sent to Nsukka. There she learns about her mother's miscarriage due to Eugene's violence and when he comes to pick them up, she wants to greet him but unconsciously avoids. When she arrives at home, she feels sick just from the smell of the garden: "It was as if the high walls locked in the scent of the ripening cashews and mangoes and avocados. It nauseated me." (*PH* 252-253) Actually, coming back to father makes her sick. The ripening fruits remind of the control and cruelty by Eugene.

It is notable that despite cruel punishments by her father and different living at her aunt's house, she never disapproves Eugene's behaviour. Tunca has also written about it in *Ideology in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*: "Kambili arguably learns to question her father's principles, but she is never able to completely remove the aureole she has put around Eugene's head." (128). Kambili's reaction is uncertain to her mother's confession because of maturity and the mother is not blaming her father directly. Kambili's growing process is a symbol of Nigerian history dealing with Western influence and the colonial past. Mama being a flexible character, coping up with her husband's cruelty and silently poisons him is an example of a powerful revolt.

The freedom of women from all restrictions against their peaceful co-existence beside men deserves the support of all humanity. This study talks about every African woman in the patriarchal society and claims her rights. Women need to overcome and set up their limitations within the society or just being treated as showpieces or doormats. On analyzing Adichie's

female voices from a Nigerian background living in a patriarchal society with different level of empowerment and freedom. Her characters are dynamic in their attitudes and cope up with abusive situations and find a way to escape like Kambili and her mother. The importance of these characters is in the probabilities to improve their situations. They are not silent but strong and powerful in expressions. Adichie's characters are not mere fictitious but are a ray of hope for contemporary African women who get power in their journey for gender equality.

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