

## RECONNOITERING GENDER DISCRIMINATION, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND WOMEN OPPRESSION IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS.

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Purple Hibiscus is set in postcolonial Nigeria, a country tormented by political issues, religion, gender and economic issues. The central character is Kambili Achike, aged fifteen and her mother Beatrice Achike who are subjugated by the patriarchal society. The family is dominated by Eugene, father of Kambili and husband of Beatrice. Purple Hibiscus is a novel written by the renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie has portrayed the ghastly domestic violence faced by Kambili and Beatrice meted out by Papa Eugene. Beatrice faces domestic harassment in massive scale that she has many miscarriages and other times violently slashed for disrespecting religion. Kambili also undergoes domestic violence in the novel that she almost loses her life. The women characters in the novel Purple Hibiscus suffer silently as they are unable to voice out their opinion or retaliates since they are women for women are considered weaker sex. The novel Purple Hibiscus throws light on the issue of gender discrimination. The research paper is aimed at understanding the behavior of Eugene the Patriarch and the gender discrimination faced by the Achikes at the hands of Eugene.*

**Key Words:** *Domestic Violence, Oppression, Patriarch, Women, and Suffering.*

Gender Discrimination has been one of the highly debated topics in literature. Almost every work in literature features the gender disparity faced by women all over the world. Gender discrimination can be explained as women who are denied of equality, money, freedom to express, employment opportunities, unequal wages, respect, privileges, domestic violence and otherwise. It can also be termed as Sexual discrimination. Apart from the above-mentioned, women irrespective of their age also experience genital mutilation, Sexual harassment, acid burning, Domestic Violence and Physical Psychological Verbal and Emotional abuse, digital abuse, femicide, human trafficking, workplace harassment, slavery etc. Gender Discrimination has been a universal problem where men have always had power while women remained subordinate. The silent suffering of women has been voiced out in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

*Purple Hibiscus* is one of the best Nigerian novels written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in the year 2003. *Purple Hibiscus* is a heart touching story of a fifteen-year-old girl Kambili who undergoes torture at the hands of her father. The novel won Common Wealth Prize in 2005 and gained popularity and is translated into 28 languages. The novel features gender discrimination, one of the major themes discussed in literature. The theme gender discrimination is very predominant in Postcolonial writings. Women in general suffered a lot in the world due to their sex. Whereas Blacks suffered more. Blacks have already been suppressed in the world for their colour. While black women are doubly suppressed as they are suppressed for their colour and also by their own black men. Gender discrimination is a social evil. Women are pushed to the margins because of their sex. It can be rightly reframed as social exclusion.

The theme is well brought out by fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike and her mother Beatrice who undergo silent suffering at the hands of Eugene. Papa Eugene a devout Christian exhibits control over the family. Papa Eugene is a staunch catholic who ironically fails to understand the feelings of the women folk. He is harsh, hasty in decision making, strict and inflicts punishment on the women in his family due to his rigid belief in Catholicism. Domination is at peak whether papa Eugene is present in the house or not ultimately causing the women to live in fear. 'Fear' rules the family thus making living difficult under papa Eugene's regime.

Being an Igbo and patriarchal in nature Eugene has always made guidelines for the family. He wanted his children always to be the class toppers especially in Catechism. When Jaja his son had missed out two questions in his catechism class, Papa Eugen takes severe action injuring his little finger. Eugene always forced his family to follow Catholic rituals faithfully. He was particular that his children should always take the right path and

be devoted to his religion - Catholicism. Papa followed the alien religion introduced by the colonizers so loyally that he forgot to understand the teachings of the bible. In the Bible, Colossians 3:19 says "Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them". Papa the faithful Christian failed to sync this teaching into his regular activities. Papa followed ritualized abuse. Beatrice wife of Eugene undergoes a lot of physical, mental and emotional trauma silently. Beatrice's agony is intolerable and the pain she undergoes is unbearable.

As a woman she remains unheard in the house. She never raises her voice against her husband. She even suffers many miscarriages because of her husband's anger. When Beatrice was pregnant for her third child, due to her morning sickness Beatrice felt unwilling to get down from the car to greet the catholic priest. This annoyed Eugene and, in his anger, he thrashes his pregnant wife. Beatrice suffers a miscarriage and almost loses her life. In spite of her physical and psychological torture Mama Beatrice remains faithful to her husband. She takes care of him with utmost care. She always respected him and gave the best to him. Even though Eugene bashed her up she silently kept all her sufferings to herself. The UNICEF, 2001 has assessed that in many parts of Africa beating the wives and children is widely authorized form of discipline.

When the children are away at Nsukka, once again Papa Eugene beats Mama black and blue. Papa never cares for his wife's body nor is he concerned about her health. She puts up silently with her husband's atrocities. The female body is taken for granted while a man takes care of himself regularly. Brenda Cooper claims every time Beatrice polishes the figurines after every thrashing depicts Mama trying to erase the memories of her physical torture. She wants to be distracted to camouflage her abuse. Eugene is considered to be a towering figure in public, a benevolent man outside the house in contrast he dominates his household and keeps the women folks constant fear.

Living with fear is the most terrible thing that can ever happen to a human. Women are always deprived of their freedom and happiness. The teen aged Kambili, daughter of Eugene is also a victim of her father's male tyranny. Kambili liked her grandfather, she saw him as a human while Papa Eugene detested his father as he was a traditionalist who believed in Igbo Gods and traditions. Papa Eugene who followed Christianity considered his father as a pagan and his custom a heathen one. As a result, Papa Eugene punishes his daughter by pouring boiling hot water on her feet for living under the same roof with her pagan grandfather at Nsukka.

"Kambili, you are precious." His voice quavered now, like someone speaking at a funeral, choked with emotion. "You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it." He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He

poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face... I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (Adichie 194)

In another incident Kambili and her mother are lashed with the leather belt by papa for disobeying the catholic law. An hour before attending the church Kambili suffers from monthly cramps. Her mother gives her a tablet for her cramps. They are caught by papa Eugene who immediately rips them with the leather belt. Eugene as a man can never understand a woman suffering from their monthly woes. He can never understand hormonal changes involved in a woman's body. Apart from being abused verbally and physically Kambili is also psychologically abused. Any child affected psychologically will lose her self – confidence. Papa Eugene broke Kambili's self- confidence and made her a naive child. Kambili undergoes a lot of miseries unable to retaliate or voice out her opinion, as she is a female. The child remains scared and isolated until she meets her cousins at Nsukka. Her mother watches silently the horrifying disasters taking place in her house unable to strike back since the society has made it mandatory that women should be submissive to their husbands and should not retaliate. Hence, she could not defend her daughter. Igbo culture has been patriarchal in nature this is evident in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Achebe is a renowned African writer. He is called the father of African Literature. His writings feature the Igbo customs and rituals. He brought out the gender discrimination practiced in Igbo land. He clearly gives the gender demarcation of the chores between man and woman. Igbo women remained in the house taking care of cooking, washing, breeding and looking after their children. Igbo men took care of yam cultivation and became leaders of the clan. They also wrestled to show their masculinity. Okonkwo always regretted that his daughter Ezinma was born a girl. Okonkwo worked for his family he loved them but never showed it out as he wanted to be on the domineering side as the culture had thought him. Igbo culture gave a lot of importance to men. Igbo customs have constantly taught their generations that men are superior to women. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie belongs to Igbo culture and is therefore able to recount the patriarchal influences in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. Similar to Okonkwo, Papa Eugene deep inside loved his family but never showed it outward. He felt masculinity lay in carrying himself superior. Both Okonkwo and Papa Eugene were hasty and short tempered.

Papa Eugene did not allow his family to visit any traditionalist Igbo house as he believed them to be pagan. Papa Eugene discovers that Kambili held a picture of her grandfather in her bedroom. She is kicked and stamped by her father so violently that he breaks her ribs. Papa Eugene's actions have always been violent and inhumane towards women especially.

“What has gotten into you?” Papa asked. “What is wrong with you?”

I lay on the floor, curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in my Integrated science for the Junior Secondary Schools.

“Get up!” Papa said again. I still did not move. 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 thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and the whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, “Please, biko, please.” More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (Adichie 211)

His rigidity failed with his son, Jaja who started retailing at an early age. Even though Jaja knew his father's temper soon started ignoring his father's advice, he even once walked out of the dining room half way during dinner time. Papa Eugene was unable to control Jaja because he was a boy hence, he was given more space. It is heart wrecking to see Papa Eugene abuse Jaja verbally while Kambili and Mama being abused physically, psychologically and mentally since they belonged to the weaker sex.

Beatrice Achike and Kambili have always been loyal to Eugene. They believed and trusted him. But his religious fanaticism pushed them to an extent where they wanted to escape from his clutches. Kambili always wanted to run away to her aunt's place, Nsukka where she had freedom and space to be herself. Auntie Ifeoma is always kind and gave space to her children to think and voice out their opinions. Adichie has tactfully interwoven the theme gender discrimination through the character Auntie Ifeoma. Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's widowed sister lived alone with her children. Kambili admired her aunt who respected her children. She allowed them to talk during dinner time and also watch television without much restriction. They had no rules or regulations to be followed.

Aunty Ifeoma too lived in peace as she had no man to control her life unlike her sister-in-law Beatrice.

Thus, the study can be concluded that Domestic violence, abuses and sufferings are basically designed by the society and culture. Gender discrimination faced by the women in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* are immeasurable and pathetic. Papa Eugene curbed and controlled his women with violence especially ritualized abuse. His obsession with his religion left the family to suffer immensely. The concept of happy family which his religion taught him ironically never happened in the Achike family.

Various types of abuses are faced by Kambili. Her mind is gripped completely with her fear of her father. Childhood abuse can never be erased. This will always remain in the memory of the child for its entire life. Beatrice undergoes all forms of abuses. Her culture and society have silenced her. Society taught women to be voiceless. It is painful to see how domestic violence and gender discrimination leaves the members of the household shattered and ruined. Denial of freedom for women by the patriarchal society is the highest form of cruelty. This cruel act is performed by Papa Eugene episode after episode in the lives of Kambili and Beatrice in the novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

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