
The Politics of Emotion in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: A Martha Nussbaumian Perspective on Anger and Compassion

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Article Received: 19/09/2025**Article Accepted:** 17/10/2025**Published Online:** 19/10/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.10.395**Abstract:**

This paper seeks the pervasive role of anger in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, utilising the ethical philosophy of Martha C. Nussbaum as its primary critical framework. The novel dramatically illustrates Nussbaum's critique that anger is a fundamentally flawed and irrational emotion plagued by a self-defeating desire for retribution and status restoration.

The analysis focuses on Eugene Achike's tyranny, which embodies both of Nussbaum's problematic paths: the "Road of Status," where his violence serves to narcissistically restore his patriarchal and religious rank, and the "Road of Payback," where he delusionally believes inflicting pain can "purify" his family. The tragic outcome of Mama's retaliatory poisoning further confirms this critique, showing that even justified rage leads not to healing, but to intensified isolation and suffering.

The paper argues that true liberation is achieved not through rage, but through The Transition which is the conscious redirection of emotional energy into constructive action and compassionate hope. This is showcased by Aunt Ifeoma and realised through the gradual restoration of the family's Human Capabilities—specifically their Emotions, Practical Reason, and Affiliation—providing an ethical pathway toward genuine post-colonial healing and freedom.

Keywords: Anger; Retribution; Road of Status; Capabilities Approach; Compassionate Hope; The Transition; Domestic Violence.

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an internationally acclaimed Nigerian author, essayist, and speaker whose work has established her as a preeminent voice in contemporary African and feminist literature. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful narrative set in post-colonial Nigeria, focusing on the wealthy yet severely dysfunctional Achike family. Anger is the central, destructive force that dictates the family's internal life, acting as a direct consequence of both domestic and post-colonial trauma.

The novel establishes this dynamic immediately. As the narrator, Kambili Achike, recalls the inciting incident, she states, "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 on the étagère." This explosive act of violence instantly establishes the regime of fear and control under the patriarch, Eugene Achike (Papa). His relentless, violent rage—rooted in religious zealotry and a deep-seated internalisation of colonial-era authoritarianism is the primary source of conflict, systematically violating his family's bodily integrity and psychological well-being.

The complex responses of his family, the children's internalised silence and fear (denying their "capabilities") and Beatrice's tragic retaliatory poisoning, illuminate the nuanced psychological interplay of anger, fear, and ultimate resistance. This paper utilises Martha C. Nussbaum's ethical critique as its foundational lens. Nussbaum argues that anger, while often natural, is conceptually flawed because the desire for retributive payback clouds judgment and perpetuates suffering. This paper explores how the novel dramatises the limitations of rage and ultimately recommends Nussbaum's vision of The Transition—moving from retributive anger to compassionate hope and the expansion of the characters' human capabilities. Martha Nussbaum rigorously challenges conventional views that valorise anger, arguing that it inherently involves the flawed idea of payback or retribution (Nussbaum 15).

Nussbaum identifies two core, problematic trajectories anger takes:

1.The Road of Status (Domination): This narcissistic error "converts all injuries into problems of relative position" and aims to achieve a "reversal of positions by lowering the offender in status or reputation... making the world revolve around the desire of vulnerable selves for domination and control" (Nussbaum 28–29).

Nussbaum concludes that anger is a "self-defeating dream" but allows for Transition-Anger: an awareness of injustice channelled into "work and hope for the future instead" (Nussbaum 30).

2.The Road of Payback (Retribution): This is based on the irrational "magical idea" that "inflicting pain on the wrongdoer somehow restores, or contributes to restoring, the important thing that was damaged. This is a normatively problematic belief because the wrongdoer's suffering does not bring back the person or valued item that was damaged" (Nussbaum 18).

The Road of Status: Domination and Control

Eugene's tyranny is a continuous, narcissistic effort to prevent any perceived "down-ranking" of his religious and patriarchal status. He sees every infraction such as Jaja's refusal of communion, a faint smile from Kambili, or Mama's perceived disloyalty as a direct threat to his self-image as a "Good Christian." His elaborate rituals of control and his immediate, violent rage when his system is threatened are mechanisms for maintaining total domination. He focuses on the public humiliation and the direct "down-ranking" of his authority as the family head. He attempts to achieve a reversal of positions by throwing the missal and beating his family, which functions to lower the offender (Jaja) in status to that of a disobedient child, instantaneously elevating Eugene back to his position of unquestioned

power. This fixation is evident when he severely punishes Kambili and Jaja after their visits to Aunt Ifeoma.

The physical brutality, such as scalding their feet, is a ritualistic attempt to purify them and restore his supreme status in the moral hierarchy, confirming that his goal is total domination and control over their thoughts and affection. This physical punishment illustrates the brutal means Eugene uses to enforce obedience and his emotional volatility.

As Nussbaum notes, this focus on superficial personal status systematically destroys the family's "intrinsic goods," such as love and emotional health. Yet, when Jaja learns about the arrival of the third baby, he responds, "We will take care of the baby; we will protect him." (p.23). His words directly resist Eugene's cycle of domination by reclaiming love and protection as guiding principles. Unlike their father, Jaja and his siblings attempt to nurture rather than control, showing how children, in their shared suffering, preserve the *intrinsic goods* Eugene seeks to annihilate.

The Road of Payback: The Magical Idea

Eugene embodies what Nussbaum calls Payback Anger—the illusion that retaliatory pain can restore what feels lost, whether that be spiritual grace, moral order, or authority. His violence is not random but driven by the belief that every "sin" demands reparation through suffering. This is clearest in the episode where he pours boiling water on Kambili's feet after she returns from Papa-Nnukwu's home.

"His voice quavered now, like someone speaking at a funeral, choked with emotions. 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" (p. 194) (Adichie).

Treating her time with her "pagan" grandfather as a transgression, he tries to "burn the sin" out of her. Here, pain is imagined as a form of balance, a way to pay back the supposed offence and recover defiled purity. Yet, in reality, his brutality only deepens Kambili's trauma and silence, illustrating Nussbaum's critique that payback never truly heals or restores; it only perpetuates harm.

A similar dynamic unfolds when Eugene viciously beats Jaja and Kambili for missing parts of their confessions, believing physical discipline will stamp out imperfection and reestablish religious exactitude. For Eugene, their pain is a form of repayment that mends their supposed failures. However, the result is not restored love or moral authority but an atmosphere of terror. As Kambili recounts, "Get up, Papa said. 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... Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo... 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." (pp.210-211)

This vivid description illustrates the relentlessness of his punishment, which is less about correction and more about domination. Jaja's eventual act of defiance—his quiet refusals and his final sacrifice in protecting Beatrice by taking responsibility for Eugene's death—signals an alternative path, embodying what Nussbaum terms Transition-Anger: a future-oriented, constructive move beyond mere retribution.

Eugene even directs payback anger toward himself, treating his body as something that must be punished to achieve moral balance. His scalding of his own lips with boiling tea and other acts of mortification are attempts to pay for his perceived sins. Again, these actions demonstrate the futility of Nussbaum's "magical idea." Rather than restoring grace, they expose his inner despair and spiritual emptiness.

In all these examples, Adichie shows how payback anger consumes both victim and perpetrator, producing only cycles of fear and violence. Against this, Aunt Ifeoma's household, with its laughter, dialogue, and encouragement, points toward the alternative Nussbaum urges: a constructive redirection of anger into healing, freedom, and forward-looking justice.

The Limits of Payback and the Necessity of Transition

Beatrice's desperate act of poisoning Eugene is a strikingly tragic embodiment of Nussbaum's "road of payback." After years of brutal abuse, her ribs broken by his beatings, her pregnancies ended through his violence, she finally retaliates, convinced that removing Eugene will restore her agency and secure her children's freedom. This act, though understandable in context, is guided by the fantasy that retribution can reset what has been stolen from her life.

Episodes earlier in the novel underscores just how trapped she feels. We learn that she has multiple miscarriages which was a direct result of Eugene's beatings and yet she remains outwardly submissive, stirring her tea silently, her every gesture muted by fear. When Father Amadi or Aunt Ifeoma suggests alternatives, she admits in subdued tones that "Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me where would I go?"p.250 signalling the depth of her entrapment. Within this cycle of violence and silence, her final decision to act through poison becomes her only imagined pathway to freedom: payback in its purest sense.

However, as Nussbaum argues, the fantasy of payback is fatally flawed. Beatrice's poisoning does not restore peace or dignity. Instead, it deepens her suffering. After Eugene's death, she is crushed by guilt and collapses into a near-catatonic silence, unable to enjoy the "freedom" she once sought. The family is not unified in joy but fragmented further: Jaja, in a tragic reversal, claims responsibility for the crime and accepts prison in her place, embodying the devastating consequences of payback anger. Kambili watches helplessly as her mother mentally unravels and her brother is incarcerated, realising that the violence has only traded one form of confinement, Eugene's domestic tyranny to another legal and psychological bondage.

Thus, Mama's retaliation demonstrates the central illusion behind payback: it cannot return what has been lost. Her agency, dignity, and peace are not restored by Eugene's absence, because retribution merely reproduces emptiness in new forms. As Adichie shows, Beatrice's act parallels Nussbaum's critique of anger's magical thinking. The costs of violence reverberate, perpetuating isolation instead of generating renewal. True restoration in the novel is glimpsed not through retaliation but in the small seeds of transition for example Kambili's growing voice, Jaja's quiet refusals, and Aunt Ifeoma's nurturing alternative model of forward-looking, compassionate justice

The Shift to Transition-Anger

The novel dramatises the ethical turn that Nussbaum advocates through the movement from retributive anger to Transition-Anger, a transformation of what begins as justified rage into constructive, future-oriented justice. Adichie stages this shift most clearly through Aunt Ifeoma. Rather than meeting Eugene's authoritarian violence with retaliatory anger, Ifeoma invests her energy in intellectual courage and ethical vigilance. For instance, when Eugene dismisses her as a "heathen" for not sharing his rigid religiosity, she does not respond with hostility; instead, she patiently asserts the value of questioning, debate, and laughter in her household. Her home becomes a space of liberation, richly alive with discussion over politics, storytelling, and humour. Here Kambili first hears Amaka confidently critique religion and Papa's tyranny, experiences music and play that are absent in Enugu, and slowly realises that faith and thought can coexist with freedom. These scenes dramatise Nussbaum's Capability for Practical Reason, since they restore the possibility of independent judgment and moral reflection.

If Ifeoma's laughter-filled home exemplifies the cultivation of a hopeful, compassionate atmosphere, her deliberate insistence on dialogue and community restores the Capability for Affiliation. By living in the company of aunt Ifeoma, Kambili learns to laugh. "I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh"(p,179)

In contrast to Eugene's culture of fear, illustrated when he beats Jaja and Kambili for perceived sins however Ifeoma builds solidarity through encouragement. For example, when Kambili struggles to find her voice, Ifeoma nudges her to speak at the dinner table and praises even her halting attempts. Jaja, too, is emboldened in Nsukka: instead of reacting to

Eugene's brutality with counter-violence, he learns the strength of quiet refusal, as seen in his eventual symbolic act of dropping Papa's communion wafer and later his firm "no" to oppressive authority. This demonstrates precisely the forward-looking justice Nussbaum calls for: resistance without cycles of retribution.

By contrasting Eugene's destructive, retributive anger—directed even at those he claims to love—with the liberating practices of Ifeoma's household, Adichie illustrates how constructive ethical emotions can transform a family and nurture freedom. Kambili's eventual flowering, her ability to laugh, narrate, and imagine a different future alongside

Jaja, represents the successful embodiment of Transition-Anger, where pain and injustice become seeds of resilience rather than fuel for vengeance. Through these character arcs, the novel endorses Nussbaum's vision of justice as the restoration of substantive human capabilities rather than the perpetuation of cycles of punishment.

Purple Hibiscus uses the Achike family to dramatise that anger, while arising naturally from injustice, is an ultimately insufficient vehicle for liberation due to its irrational desire for payback. Eugene's violence and Beatrice's retaliation confirm this ethical impasse. The novel ultimately underscores the necessity of Nussbaum's framework: true liberation is framed as the restoration of the family's substantive freedoms (Capabilities), fostered through Transition-Anger and compassionate hope. This calls the characters to forge new emotional tools, grounding their freedom not in retributive rage but in reconciliation, empathy, and the flourishing of human dignity.

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