
The Weight of Silence: Family Trauma and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels

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Abstract:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author, is without a doubt one of the most well-known African authors of the twenty-first century. Her literary output touches on many modern topics. The essence of life in turbulent times is captured in her prolific writing and fiction. She has addressed the problems of common people on a global level as a modern contemporary writer who is endowed with the capacity to comprehend their everyday lives through her fiction. Through the lives of characters, settings, and narratives, Adichie's novels depict trauma. Trauma is a psychologically harmful emotional reaction to an unpleasant experience. When they experience such an event, it leaves a lasting impression on them that keeps them from moving on. Due to their individuality, each person's experience of trauma is distinct. This has been expertly depicted by Adichie in her works.

Keywords: Trauma, family, identity, gender role

Introduction:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, born on September 15, 1977, in Enugu, Nigeria, is a Nigerian author whose novels, short stories, and nonfiction delve into themes of feminism, postcolonialism, and the complexities of identity. Her second novel, "Half of a Yellow Sun" (2006), received worldwide recognition for its portrayal of the destruction wrought by the Nigerian Civil War. She is regarded as one of the most significant figures in African literature, and many critics describe her as a "global feminist icon."

Adichie's novels extensively explore the theme of family, but the concept of a literal "past life" or reincarnation is generally not a central theme. Instead, she focuses on the impact of personal and national history, ancestry, and the past on present family dynamics and individual identity. Family is a crucial and often complex theme in Adichie's work, serving as a microcosm of Nigerian society and a primary site for exploring issues of power,

love, and identity. Adichie often depicts families in crisis, particularly those shaped by rigid patriarchal structures and religious extremism. In the novel “Purple Hibiscus”, the Achike family is controlled by a tyrannical father whose domestic abuse and religious fanaticism deeply affect his wife and children.

The novel centers on the Achike family, which serves as a microcosm of post-colonial Nigeria’s struggles. Eugene’s household is characterized by wealth, but also by fear, silence, and brutal domestic abuse under the tyrannical hand of Papa Eugene, a fanatically religious Catholic who imposes rigid schedules and harsh punishments on his wife, Beatrice, and children, Kambili and Jaja. Eugene’s strict version of Catholicism leads him to reject anything he considers “pagan,” including his own father, Papa-Nnukwu, creating deep rifts in the extended family.

In sharp contrast, Eugene’s sister, Auntie Ifeoma, a widowed university professor, lives in a home filled with laughter, free expression, and love, despite financial hardships. Her catholicism is a blend of traditional Igbo cultural values and Christian faith. Kambili and Jaja’s time here is transformative, exposing them to a different, liberating family dynamic that allows them to find their own voices and self-identity. Kambili’s and Jaja’s past lives are marked by silence and an inability to express themselves, a direct result of their father’s authoritarianism which mirrors the political tyranny of the military regime in Nigeria.

Her narratives delve into the complexities of relationships between parents and children, siblings, and extended family members, highlighting themes of forgiveness, betrayal, and resilience. Family life is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. Characters negotiate their sense of self within the context of their family’s values and traditions, which often clash with external influences like colonialism and migration. In her memoir *Notes on Grief*, Adichie writes movingly about the loss of her father, exploring the universal experience of pain and how family members cope with loss. Adichie emphasizes the importance of understanding personal and national history, and how the past informs the present.

In the context of historical and political ways, her novels, such as “Half of a Yellow Sun”, are set against significant historical events like the Nigerian-Biafran War, demonstrating how political and historical dynamics deeply impact individual lives and families. Adichie’s characters often reflect on their ancestry and the legacy of their families. The experiences of previous generations, particularly regarding the civil war and colonialism, influence their present realities and choices. She advocates for using stories as a way to honor the past and ensure that diverse perspectives of history are heard, rather than just a “single story”. The past is something to be remembered, interrogated, and understood to shape the future.

Adichie uses the theme of family to explore a wide range of social and political issues, and she uses history to provide context for her characters' lives. The idea of a "past life" in a mystical sense is not a typical element of her realistic fiction; instead, she focuses on the tangible impact of the past on living individuals and their family structures.

In the novel "Americanah", the importance of strong familial bonds is emphasized. Obinze's supportive mother helps him maintain a stable identity, whereas Ifemelu's experiences, at times feeling a lack of support from her own mother in navigating her identity crisis, highlight the impact of the mother-child bond. The past in Nigeria serves as a foundation for characters' identities.

In "Americanah", Ifemelu's upbringing in Lagos shapes her worldview and provides a strong sense of cultural identity that she later grapples with and eventually reconnects with after moving to the United States. The move to the West often forces characters to confront a disconnection from their past and heritage. They struggle with the pressure to assimilate, which can lead to identity crises and a longing for home. Many characters experience intense nostalgia for their homeland. The decision to return to Nigeria, as Ifemelu does at the end of *Americanah*, symbolizes a desire for authenticity and a reconnection with their roots and past relationships.

"The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it's a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it. We don't even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we're worried they will say we're overreacting, or we're being too sensitive. And we don't want them to say, Look how far we've come, just forty years ago it would have been illegal for us to even be a couple blah blah blah, because you know what we're thinking when they say that? (Chapter 31, p. 290–291).

Thus the family unit frequently serves as a microcosm of the nation's larger political and social turmoil (post-independence Nigeria, the Biafran War). The abuse of women in her novels "Purple Hibiscus", for example, mirrors the autocratic governance and violence in the public sphere. Trauma initially imposes emotional detachment and silence on victims (Kambili's mutism, Olanna's "Dark Swoops" of panic). The journey to healing is marked by finding a voice, telling one's story, and breaking this silence. Characters are not merely passive victims. They are incredibly resilient and eventually reclaim their agency. While Beatrice reclaims her agency through the desperate act of poisoning her husband in "Purple Hibiscus", Kambili and Jaja find their voices and a path to freedom through exposure to their

Aunt Ifeoma's more open and loving household through exposure to their Aunt Ifeoma's more open and loving household. Thus Adichie blurs the lines between individual and collective trauma, showing how personal suffering is intrinsically linked to the nation's historical wounds. Heroes' ability to cope with domestic violence and war is often tied to their connection to their community and cultural heritage, which provides a sense of belonging and support. All her novels often conclude with a tentative sense of hope, even though the physical and psychological scars of trauma are still present.

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