
**THE FEMALE BODY AS THE SITE OF MEMORY AND TRAUMA:
EXPLORATIONS OF GENDER, VIOLENCE, AND RECONCILIATION IN
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S NOVEL, *PURPLE HIBISCU***

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Abstract: Women have been fighting for gender equality and fair treatment for centuries, yet they still have a long way to go. Recent perspectives on women's resilience reveal that women have been systematically taught to negate their bodily experiences to prove their mental strength. Women enduring physical abuse often do not recognize their victim status. This denial can lead to further trauma when women acknowledge their traumatic experiences. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, chronicles the life of an Igbo family in Nigeria. The challenging socio-political environment of the country amplifies the personal trauma of the female characters in the novel. This paper analyzes the aspects of gender, trauma, and violence in this novel.

Keywords: Gender, Trauma, Violence, Feminism, Women

Introduction:

It is undeniable that women across the world face violence in the domestic sphere. Often, their intimate male partners perpetrate abuse in the name of religion and tradition. The patriarchal society in which women live has repeatedly reinforced the notion that women are commodities to be bought and exchanged. A man living with his partner exercises absolute power over her due to the ingrained societal norm that men are superior to women and must be "tamed" and controlled. Religions worldwide have taught women to be subordinate to men and to act as the muted partner supporting her husband's cause. A research paper on domestic violence in Ghana indicates that religious beliefs and practices play a dual role in husband-to-wife abuse, legitimizing male authority over women and entrapping victims in abusive relationships (Adjei et al.). Male-centric language and verbosity in holy scriptures reinforce men's perceived superiority over women. Women from India or Africa have been subjected to this subordination strategy of patriarchal society.

Discourses on violence against women in the intimate sphere are scarce due to intense scrutiny and challenges to the validity of their testimonies. The female body is both an object of sexual desire and something to be controlled. Victims of intimate partner physical violence often fail to acknowledge their victimhood due to the covert normalization of abuse. Women are consistently taught to be dissatisfied with their bodies (McLean et al.). This paper aims to study the effects of violence and trauma on the female body and the inscriptions these leave on both body and mind. Women suffer because of their bodies and have been systematically taught to negate their bodily experiences to preserve their image as resilient and strong. This traditional coping mechanism hinders their healing process, which requires confronting reality and accepting their victim status. This paper examines how resistance and defiance aid in the healing process and the reclamation of women's identities.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an emerging female novelist from Nigeria whose works have garnered global acclaim. Her writings reflect Nigeria's values, customs, and traditions. Her feminist voice demonstrates that Nigerian women are asserting their right to equality in all spheres of life. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, is a powerful narrative of violence, trauma, and political marginalization inflicted on women. The novel is set during a period of political turmoil in Nigeria. The aggression in the public sphere exacerbates the aggression and intimidation in the private sphere.

Purple Hibiscus chronicles the life of an ethnic Igbo family in Enugu, Nigeria. The family's devout, domineering patriarch, Eugene, controls the household with an iron fist. His powerful socio-economic status grants him absolute authority over his family, particularly his wife, Beatrice. The story unfolds through the perspective of the fifteen-year-old daughter, Kambili Achike, who is both a victim and a witness to her mother's physical abuse. Her realization of the physical and mental trauma she endures is heightened when she meets her cousins, who lead independent and empowered lives under the upbringing of their mother, Aunt Ifeoma. Kambili's recognition of her mother's trauma is delayed due to the unique way trauma manifests in the female body. Beatrice's physical suffering leaves a lasting, transgenerational trauma in Kambili. As Kathleen Olympia Nader notes in her article, "Violence: Effects of Parents' Previous Trauma on Currently Traumatized Children,"

"...transgenerational transmission (of trauma) described in the oral and written traditions of several cultures...appears that experiences that occur with intensity—positive or negative—are imprinted on the parent or family in such a way that they emerge in subsequent generations." (581)

From these lines, we understand that unresolved trauma and helplessness are passed on transgenerationally due to the parent's direct trauma. Readers encounter several instances illustrating how silence and lack of language have become intrinsic

characteristics of Beatrice and her children. An awkward silence pervades the home environment. The family's dining experiences are as traumatic as the physical abuse inflicted by the man of the house. Eugene is the only one permitted to initiate conversation and express himself freely. Trauma can induce a condition of linguistic disability in its victims. Words choke in Kambili's throat. She is shocked when introduced to her Aunt Ifeoma, a university professor who speaks with authority to her father: "Every time Aunt Ifeoma spoke to Papa, my heart stopped, then started again in a hurry...I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut..." (77). Kambili's constant need for her father's approval and validation shapes her into a character that aligns with his expectations. Kambili's trauma is control-based, with her father's toxic masculinity restricting her independent thought. Religion is a potent factor empowering patriarchy in this society, and Eugene wields his authority through the empowerment conferred by his Christian faith. As a teenager, Kambili suffers from severe psychosocial stress disorder due to her father's physical abuse, inflicted in the name of religion. "I was stained by failure" (39) reflects Kambili's deteriorating self-image when she fails to meet her father's expectations. Her father's tight slaps and punishments cause less trauma due to her undeveloped awareness of her reality. She remains unaware of her victim status until she visits Nsukka and stays at Aunt Ifeoma's house, where she observes her cousins, Amaka and Obiora, with their strong personalities and independence. Kambili's trauma intensifies when she becomes aware of her vulnerability. Her encounter with her grandfather, a tribal Igbo traditionalist who refused to convert to Christianity, prompts her to question her father's ideology. The seeds of defiance and resistance against her father's violent treatment are sown after witnessing her cousins' empowered lives. This heightened awareness of her identity marks a maturation in her sexuality. Her love for Father Amadi signifies her initiation into adulthood. The violent scene upon her return to Nsukka marks a new beginning. She is repeatedly kicked by her father for holding onto a picture of her estranged grandfather:

"I lay on the floor, curled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in my Integrated Science for 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... 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... More stings. More slaps." (211)

This brutal attack by Eugene marks Kambili's rebirth as a defiant, resilient, rebellious young woman. Curled on the floor like a fetus, she is poised to emerge with a new identity. The physical pain inflicted on her female body becomes a site of memory and trauma. Her traumatic experience post-Nsukka is manageable due to her growing agency and heightened consciousness of her Igbo identity. Her voiceless body testifies to the parental violence perpetrated on children. Kambili's physical

abuse, combined with witnessing her father's sadistic abuse of her mother, leaves her vulnerable and helpless. Children exposed to chronic stress and toxic environments often suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Kambili exhibits PTSD symptoms throughout her life, including an inability to make friends, claustrophobic social interactions, low self-image, a distorted understanding of her sexuality, and personality disorders.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is so normalized in Nigeria that it rarely provokes public outcry. Studies indicate that IPV is prevalent across Nigeria, with rates varying by region, ethnicity, and community context. National surveys report that 15% to 36% of women have experienced IPV in the past year, with higher rates in certain regions and groups (Adebowale et al.; Oyediran et al.). Readers' first encounter with Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* involves the shattering of her ceramic ballet dancer figurines in the *étagère*. These figurines hold symbolic significance. Each time Beatrice is beaten by Eugene, she polishes them: "I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door" (10). Beatrice's ritual carries multiple meanings. The figurines symbolize the female body, highlighting the patriarchal society's contradictory views: women are seen as fragile, delicate, beautiful, and vulnerable, yet they are beaten if they resist subordination. Kambili notes, "The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple of an avocado, she rearranged them after she polished them" (11), underscoring the normalization of physical violence in their reality. The triggers for these attacks or the couple's arguments leading to these encounters are never revealed. Beatrice's polishing ritual signals her physical assault. The figurines also represent her family, which she strives to keep intact. As long as she and the children adhere to Eugene's rules, they are safe. However, when Eugene throws a heavy missal at his son Jaja, missing him and hitting the figurines, everything Beatrice safeguards crumbles: "Mama had realized that she would not need the figurines anymore; that when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything" (15). Beatrice appears dissociated from her children's trauma. According to trauma expert Judith Herman, victims in acute traumatic environments may develop a trance-like state: "When a person is completely powerless, and any form of resistance is futile, she may go into a state of surrender... The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of consciousness." (35) As a mother, Beatrice fails to protect her children from Eugene's violent punishments. Jaja loses a finger as a child due to a brutal attack for failing to achieve first rank in his class, an incident so traumatic he never speaks of it. Kambili's rib bones are broken in another attack when she rebels against her father. Beatrice's altered consciousness contributes to her failure to shield her children.

Eugene's powerful socio-economic status, juxtaposed with Beatrice's disempowered position, leaves her with few options but to endure this toxic reality.

The demands on her female body—reproduction, nurturing, caretaking, and bearing abuse—are paramount. Her repeated attempts to bear children testify to this reality. Beatrice acknowledges that Eugene’s wealth makes him a desirable husband: “They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr. Ezendu’s second wife did. But your father stayed with me, with us” (20). Her awareness of this constant threat shapes her gratitude toward her husband. Her multiple miscarriages result from his brutal attacks, as the antithetical demands of bearing a child and enduring beatings to her stomach prevent her from fulfilling her reproductive role. Any deviation from Eugene’s orders wreaks havoc on Beatrice’s body, which is invaded, injured, and defiled. Her altered consciousness allows her to remain calm: “Her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dumps in town...” (34). This emotional emptiness is evident in her words: “There was an accident, the baby is gone” (34), conveying immense tragedy in a language devoid of emotion. This coping mechanism of dissociation and detachment enables Beatrice to survive her abusive environment. Immersed in the patriarchal value system, she becomes part of it, disagreeing with Ifeoma’s view that life begins for women when marriage ends. For Beatrice, “A husband crowns a woman’s life” (75). While Ifeoma represents an empowered, educated, and independent woman, Beatrice embodies disempowerment, dependence on her abusive husband, and a lack of courage.

Beatrice fails to emulate Ifeoma’s defiant nature, viewing her as a headstrong university woman whose ideals do not suit her reality. Ifeoma’s words, “Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes... Defiance is like marijuana—it is not a bad thing when it is used right” (144), highlight defiance as a tool for empowerment. The purple hibiscus symbolizes defiance in the novel. Just as the flower is rare, defiance, when used judiciously, can curb dominance and unwarranted violence. Eugene’s uncontrolled anger, rooted in his faith, empowers his violent actions. His Christian faith, juxtaposed against his father’s traditional Igbo beliefs, which emphasize harmony with nature and ancestors, lacks balance. His business, social standing, power obsession, and the volatile political turmoil unleash an inner demon that targets his wife. The scars on Beatrice’s body mark her vulnerability and submission.

Conclusion

Beatrice embodies a “battered woman,” suffering repeated physical violence marked on her body as scars and miscarriages. The fragility of the figurines parallels her fragile body. Her eventual act of poisoning her husband is her reclaiming of agency and resolution. Kambili’s mutism exemplifies trauma inflicted on the female body, where her voice itself is seen as defiance in a strict patriarchal society. Through her association with Aunt Ifeoma, Kambili finds her voice. She represents the typical reaction to trauma—delayed response and fragmented memory. *Purple Hibiscus* powerfully portrays how patriarchy dominates and operates in volatile political and personal contexts.

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