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Domestic Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Nutsukpo, Margaret Fafa, PhD

Department of English Studies

University of Port Harcourt

Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

E-mail: margaret.nutsukpo@uniport.edu.ng

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Abstract

Gender-based violence is an issue that has become a part of modern society, cutting across cultures, race, ethnicity and status. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, gender-based violence manifests in the form of domestic violence, projected through the Eugene Achike family around whom the story, set in the eastern part of Nigeria, revolves. Clearly, the domination of women is the most fundamental form of female subjugation in the African society. This is largely due to cultural influences for, the patriarchal culture, inherent in the African society, encourages prejudices against women, and accepts the battery of wives (and, by extension, children) by husbands as normal. Domestic violence is therefore a regular feature in many African homes, a situation which is portrayed by Adichie in her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, as she advocates change in the attitude of society to this anomaly. The success of her advocacy is the focus of this article.

Introduction

Nigerian-born Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie made her entrance into the global literary scene with the publication of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), which won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best First Book in 2005. Referred to by James Copnall as the most prominent "in a procession of critically acclaimed young Anglophone authors [who] is succeeding in attracting a new generation of readers to African literature" (20), Adichie (and her debut novel) have received wide critical acclaim.

For Brenda Cooper, Adichie, in *Purple Hibiscus*, "strives for a wholistic vision [which] integrates Igbo customs and language with Catholic ritual and which incorporates men

into her gender politics and embraces the literary traditions of her elders – Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Alice Walker” (1). Indeed, many critics, among them J. Roger Kurtz, regard Adichie’s style as being reminiscent of that of ‘the great Igbo novelist’, Chinua Achebe. He asserts:

[Adichie’s novel is] an excellent representative text for [the] “third generation” of Nigerian Literature – but even more, one that is well aware of its historical antecedents and thus characterized to a remarkable degree by an intergenerational textuality. The novel is noteworthy both for the way that it connects backwards in time to the literary generations that precede it and for the way that those very connections open up fresh perspectives and reveal a rich and complex panoply of intertextual possibilities that were not available in earlier generations, thus manifesting a new stage in the ongoing elaboration of Africa’s literary imagination (25-26).

Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, however, focus on Adichie’s feminist perspective, observing that Adichie’s proclamation of herself as “A Happy Feminist” is “very strategic in the criticism of her work, on which her feminist temperament reflects in its fullness [for,] Adichie’s prose reveals that she is a synthesis of virtually every feminist tenet; even though the element of subtlety is strong in her narrative” (195). This observation is valid, for evident in *Purple Hibiscus* is an interesting blend of feminist perspectives. This is clearly in line with the conception that, despite the fact that there are different feminist ideologies, they all have a common goal, and their stance and perspectives often cross paths. As Margaret W. Matlin aptly observes, “one of the best ways to illustrate the diversity of views within feminism is to listen to the voices of women who call themselves feminists” (495). Feminist writers, therefore, often portray this reality in their works.

While Ranti Williams praises the novel for painting a realistic picture of the contemporary Nigerian middle class laden with potential, and a society of fiercely patriotic citizenry fully aware of their nation’s flaws, she also goes further to sum up that Adichie builds “a complex picture of a man struggling with his demons, taking out his struggles on those he loves: his wife, Beatrice, his son, Jaja, and Kambili, [his daughter, the protagonist of the novel]” (“Igbo Patriarch”). Domestic violence is, thus, the dominant theme of *Purple Hibiscus* and, therefore, deserving of critical attention.

Domestic Violence in *Purple Hibiscus*

The United Nations defines violence against women as follows:

...any act... that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life... (Article 1)

Domestic violence, therefore, occurs when a partner purposely causes either physical or mental harm to the other, or other members of the family. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike, revered as a model citizen and family man, turns out to be extremely abusive in his home - he dominates, subjugates, batters and inflicts injury on his wife, children, sister and father, physically and psychologically.

The family is the mainstay of any society, and the nuclear family is regarded as the foundation which ensures the survival and stability of that society. Duvall defines the family as “[a unity of people] related by blood, marriage, or adoption, who share common experiences and, usually, bonds of affection and, optimally, ties of mutual concern and reciprocal care” (9). Obviously, ‘affection’, ‘concern’, and ‘care’ are keywords that define the relationship that exists among family members. The traditional African family consists of husband, wife and children, as well as extended relatives on the paternal and maternal sides.

The worlds of families vary – some families are closely knit, filled with warmth and love, while others are tightly regimented, cold, formal, often rich materially but lacking in affection, concern and care. The Achike family falls within this latter category: Eugene Achike, his wife, Beatrice, son, Jaja and daughter, Kambili form the nuclear family. The extended family is composed of Ifeoma (Eugene’s sister) and her children, and Papa-Nnukwu (Eugene’s father). Co-opted into the family by virtue of employment are Sisi (the househelp), and Kevin (the driver), and the gardener. Through this family, Adichie paints a graphic picture of the domestic travails in a traditional African family with a background of domestic violence and abuse.

To the outside world, Eugene is a devout Catholic, pious and modest:

Papa always sat in the front pew for mass, at the end beside the middle aisle, with Mama, Jaja and me sitting next to him. He was first to receive communion. Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar... but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace... (4)

Eugene is held in high esteem by both priest and congregation of the church he attends regularly with his family – St. Agnes Catholic Church. He also features regularly in Father Benedict’s sermon, lauded as a role model to be emulated and revered. Kambili reveals: “Father Benedict usually referred to the Pope, Papa, and Jesus – in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels...” (4).

As a philanthropist, Eugene disperses his largesse to both church and community, which earns him the title “The One Who Does for the Community”. As a human rights activist, Eugene uses his newspaper, “The Standard”, as a tool of his crusade to expose, challenge and criticize the ills of the government. This earns him an award from Amnesty World. In contrast, the Eugene Achike we meet at the homefront is a violent, abusive husband, father, brother and son, who holds his family hostage to his vicious attacks. According to *Awake!* “many women live with a constant fear of attack in the one place they should feel the safest - their own home. Yet, sympathy is all too often shown the perpetrator instead of the victims” (4).

The above situation lends credence to the following observation by Jules Henry, that “...in one’s own house, shielded from critical eyes, one can be as irrational as one pleases with one’s [family] as long as severe damage does not attract... attention. (qtd. in Skolnick and Skolnick 330). Eugene’s irrational bouts of violence which manifest in the beating of his pregnant wife until she miscarried; the scalding of his daughter’s feet; and the deformity of his son’s finger are, therefore, written off as “accidents” to protect him from being exposed for the monster that he is. However, it is not by accident that Adichie highlights Eugene’s inherent violence and the resultant symbolic

destruction at the opening of the novel: “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” (3)

In the excerpt above, the two facets of Eugene’s life - the pious Christian, on the one hand, and the violent abuser, on the other, are encapsulated, presenting us with a vivid image of Eugene’s ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ personality. Psychoanalysts propose that spiritual damage is one of the most insidious effects of child abuse. This manifests in Jaja’s open defiance of his father through his refusal to receive communion in church. His irreverent reference to the ‘host’ as ‘wafer’ and the touch of the priest as ‘nauseating’ is sacrilege to Eugene. However, this incident marks the beginning of Jaja’s rebellion against his father and religion, which propels Eugene’s violence, and offers him absolution after each atrocity. Jaja’s rejection of communion strips it of its essence and spiritual significance, and shocks his father and sister, Kambili, who reminds him of its supposed significance: “It is the body of our Lord...you cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that... (6). Although Jaja fears the implication of his action, death is evidently preferable to his father’s brutality and hypocrisy, and so, he responds: “... Then I will die, Papa” (7). This response marks the genesis of Jaja’s resolve to protect his mother and sister from the atrocities of his father in spite of consequent reprisals. Jaja’s spiritual psyche has been damaged by his father; anything else is bearable after that.

Jaja is unharmed by the thrown missal. However, the figurines which serve as an outlet for Beatrice’s pain are broken: “I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard sounds from their room, like something banged against the door. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face” (10).

The destruction of the figurines can be viewed in a positive light - it signifies the removal of the protective shield that Beatrice has built around herself and her emotions. Thus, she can now discover a more positive avenue to deal with her pain and humiliation through self-assertion. Her emphatic response to her daughter’s question as to whether she will replace the figurines is indicative of this: “Kpa... I will not replace them” (15).

Clearly, for Beatrice, much of the happiness she derives from life (and almost all of her miseries) emanates from her marriage to Eugene. Eugene is the source of her physical, emotional and spiritual anguish. In spite of this, factors such as the stigma of divorce, the stability of the children, financial security, her religious beliefs and communal expectations force her to hang onto him, stoically condoning and enduring his brutalities while her scarred and disfigured children become the silent witnesses and victims of his extreme violence as is evident in Kambili’s revelations:

We stood and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder... we cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone carried a leaking jar of red watercolour all the way downstairs. Jaja scrubbed while I wiped. (32-33)

Beatrice only garners the courage to leave very briefly after Eugene beats her to a state of miscarriage. Docile and submissive, she returns to Eugene’s home despite the dangers, with ready excuses for his brutality: “He is carrying more than any man should

carry. Do you know what Ade's death did to him? It is too much for one person" (250). At this point, Nancy Chodorow's observation that "women's motherhood and mothering seem to be the most important features in accounting for the universal secondary status of women" (176), seems very apt. Beatrice is dedicated to the role of motherhood and mothering, for this role is so obviously the sole source of happiness in her marriage, and the acme of her success as a woman. Unfortunately, the continuance of this role is, at the same time, largely dependent on the continuity of her union with Eugene. Should she desert her husband, what would become of her children, her place in their lives and her fulfillment as a mother? It is these thoughts that condition her acceptance of her subjugation and victimization.

Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, who is under no misconceptions about her brother, finds the excuses above unacceptable. Adichie juxtaposes Beatrice's situation with that of Ifeoma, a widow, who has three children to cater for. Through Ifeoma's admonishing, Beatrice is confronted with stark reality: "Gimidi, what are you saying?... when Ifediora was alive, there were times... when the University did not pay salaries for months. Ifediora and I had nothing, eh, yet he never raised a hand to me "(250).

Clearly, Ifeoma's relationship with her family is sharply contrasted with Eugene's, and this contrast is further highlighted during Kambili and Jaja's brief spell with their aunt.

Duvall observes that "family living provides the on-going sense of belonging that is the essence of loving and being loved. Members of a family belong to each other that they gain a basic security which is nowhere so assured" (29). Evident in Ifeoma's home and in her relationship with her children is love, joy, security and a sense of belonging from which Kambili and Jaja benefit during their stay with her in Nsukka. A bond develops between the children and their aunt's family; a bond which encloses Papa-Nnukwu, their "heathen" grandfather, from whose company they are prohibited, as well. It is this bond that prompts Kambili's persistent requests for her aunt, after she had been battered into unconsciousness by her father. She had dared to defile their home with a painting of her grandfather, a heathen, and, therefore, unworthy of Eugene's love and care. Conscious of the impending danger, Ifeoma alerts Beatrice: "This cannot go on... when a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head..." (213).

This warning, coming after a litany of abuses and violations, should have served as a catalyst for Beatrice to assert herself in her marriage and family. As a father, Eugene is mandated to protect his children from the dangers of life, and provide them with stability and continuous guidance. Evidently, children need "discipline to restrain their wilder impulses [and] help them develop self-control... They need reasonable limits within which to be free - to explore, to express feelings, to investigate, and to develop" (Duvall 23-24). Rather, Eugene subjects his children to extreme physical violence in the guise of discipline: he slaps Kambili for getting to the car late when the driver picks her up from school; lashes her with a leather belt for breaking a Eucharist fast; mutilates Jaja's left hand and deforms his little finger for missing two questions in a catechism test; scalds Kambili's tender feet with boiling water for being in possession of her grandfather's picture and worse, for trying to prevent its destruction - a situation which earns her broken ribs and internal injury.

In addition to physical violence, Eugene subjects his family to various forms of psychological trauma: a strict study regimen which denies his children many of the

little joys of childhood (such as wearing play clothes, watching television or listening to music); lack of regular contact with their aunt and cousins; disallowing them from developing a close relationship with their grandfather. Eugene does not only deny his family the joy of interacting with his father, he also denies his father the love, security and the financial assistance that should have been his by virtue of his position as the legitimate father of a wealthy son; a right, which, in the African society, is accorded great respect and reverence. However, this situation persists until his father's death. Eugene absolutely refuses to have any contact with his father unless he converts to Christianity. Ironically, reminiscent of Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Eugene makes more than adequate provision for his father's burial. Ifeoma and her family should have also benefited from Eugene's largesse, but this is not the case. As a widow and the single-parent of three, Ifeoma struggles to cater for her family while her rich brother often looks on passively.

As a direct result of Eugene's psychological violence, Kambili is severely handicapped in her interaction with others, lacking the ability to communicate confidently and openly with those around her. As such, she "whispers". It takes Father Amadi's attentions to repair her self-esteem and worth. With him, she smiles, laughs, runs and dreams, because he instils in her self-confidence and hope through his encouragement. He assures: "You can do anything you want, Kambili" (239). Kambili's belief in Father Amadi's encouragement and assurance lends credence to Duvall's assertion that children require a strong sense of self-esteem to "find themselves as worthy persons. They need a sense of confidence to become what they are potentially capable of being..." (24). It is, therefore, not surprising that, in the absence of a father's love, care, friendship, encouragement and support, Kambili turns to Father Amadi, on whom she develops a crush, to fill the void created by Eugene, her father. Jaja, on the other hand, assumes the role of protector, taking the blame where possible, to shield his mother and sister from the wrath of his father; Jaja no longer regards his father as a model of manhood or fatherhood. Apart from refusing the 'host' at mass, he also fails to compliment his father on the production of a new cashew drink in his factory, saying: "...there are no words in my mouth" (13), before walking out on the family during a meal, a situation which prompts Kambili to remark: "This had never happened before in my entire life, never. The compound walls would crumble, I was sure, and squash the frangipani trees. The sky would cave in... something would happen..." (14).

Kambili's near-death experience serves as the eventual catalyst that propels Beatrice to assert herself on behalf of her children, or risk losing them. Liz Kelly remarks that "the threat and reality of violence may result in women developing strategies for self-protection..." (348), and, although poisoning Eugene is a radical strategy to break free from his stranglehold, she makes this choice, having been pushed to the wall. With Eugene's death, her dignity, freedom and security, and that of her children are restored. For Beatrice, murder becomes what Fanon regards as the "absolute line of action" (67); it is a choice made to secure her financial future and, most importantly, that of her children; the only choice through which she can assume the honour of widowhood rather than suffer the indignities of a divorcee. Isam M. Shihada remarks that "women pay dearly with their freedom and dignity to obey the laws of the patriarchal...system that dominates society. They also pay a heavy price in order to become free" (176). For Beatrice, this price, the only option left to eradicate their abuse and victimization, almost destroys the life of her son when he steps in to take full responsibility for his

father's death. Jaja degenerates into a world-weary cynic who questions the motives of God: "... look what He did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son. But have you ever wondered why? Why did He have to murder his own son so we would be saved? Why didn't He just go ahead and save us?" (289).

Evidently, Jaja's psyche has been so thoroughly battered that had Beatrice not woken up from her slumber when she did, Jaja would have killed Eugene himself. It is, therefore, easy for him to assume the blame because, to his young mind, had he acted fast and responsibly enough, his mother would not have had to do the job. Significantly, Beatrice does not get any argument from her children when she calmly informs them that she has killed their father, her husband. Kambili's sole objection is against the method of execution: she wonders why her mother had chosen to poison his tea, remembering the love sips she and Jaja were constantly urged to take from Eugene's cup. Their lives could have been endangered as well! On Jaja's incarceration, Beatrice degenerates into a state of clinical depression. Kambili reveals:

She has been different ever since Jaja was locked up, since she went about telling people she killed Papa... But nobody listened to her; they still don't. They think grief and denial - that her husband is dead and that her son is in prison - have turned her into this vision of a painfully bony body, of skin speckled with blackheads the size of watermelon seeds... Most times, her answers are nods and shakes of the head... [and often] ... she simply sat and stared (296).

Experts postulate that abuse victims often have difficulty maintaining healthy relationships, and similar symptoms manifest in adults raised in families or environments in which they were battered, belittled or humiliated. Eugene's formative years spent with a Reverend Father who disciplined him through physical abuse seem to have left their mark on him. Should he then be absolved from his atrocities which are wreaked only on his wife, children, sister and father, the very people he should have been protecting? In my candid opinion, forgiveness – yes; absolution - no! Eugene, the "man of integrity", "the bravest man", "the philanthropist", is the same man who scalds his innocent daughter's feet, maims his son, batters his wife, denies his sister of material support and encouragement, and turns his back on his aged father when he needs him most. All these atrocities he endeavours to carefully and effectively conceal from the public in order to preserve his hypocrisy.

According to Julia T. Wood, men who resort to physical aggression do so "to gain or sustain self-esteem, to win the respect of others, to maintain control over people and situations" (294). Unfortunately, the end result of this aggression, as is evident in Eugene's case, is the direct opposite of what these men set out to achieve in the first place – loss of self-esteem, loss of respect and loss of control!

The Beijing Declaration asserts:

Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace [which] violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms... (*Beijing and Beyond...* 203-204)

Abuse of any form against women, and by extension, children is, therefore, unacceptable; child abuse is the ultimate betrayal from a parent. Children look up to

their parents, especially their fathers, as a source of authority and a model of manhood. Sons want to emulate their fathers, and daughters need their father's male input to grow up confident and assured of their femininity. Eugene's betrayal of his children's love and trust does not only constrict them and inhibit their potentials as human beings, but also endangers their lives. All human beings are entitled to equal dignity and rights. Eugene's family is, therefore, entitled to the same dignity and rights he accords himself; the same dignity and rights he demands from the government on behalf of, and for the suffering masses. Beatrice, who represents the African woman, represents the future of the African child. She therefore deserves to be respected, supported and honoured, not degraded, rejected and dehumanized.

Conclusion

Through the Achike family, Adichie projects two extremes of feminism - African feminism, which is liberal, accommodationist, and more tolerant of the follies of men, and radical feminism, which advocates separatism and rebellion for self-actualization. Thus, Beatrice goes through the gamut of both ideologies. Firstly, she accepts and tolerates Eugene's domination, brutality and victimization in order to preserve the sanctity of her marriage. Then, she progresses from the liberal at the beginning of the novel, to a radical feminist, who destroys the obstacles and barriers to her survival, positive progress and fulfilment, at the conclusion of the novel.

Adichie highlights a very important aspect of family life - parenthood - and points out, through *Purple Hibiscus*, that the decisions parents make about their roles in families will have a deep and lasting influence on the lives and personalities of their children. She draws attention to the fact that motherhood is an important role in the family on which the well-being of the family and the nation may be justifiably claimed to depend. Women, mothers especially, should, therefore, be appreciated, respected, loved and cared for, and these privileges should be allowed them from the home by the parents, husbands and all males of the clan or group who must ensure that their lives are peaceful, just and humane.

It would be apt to end this article with Daniel Massa's assessment of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as an impressive first novel which "transcends national relevance" and depicts the reactions of a family as its members react to "love, cultural dislocation, political oppression and domestic violence in their search for personal freedom" ("Commonwealth Writer's Prize").

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