

Nurturing African National Unity by Decimating Gender Vulnerabilities through Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: a Womanist perspective

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Abstract

It is an established knowledge that over the years, women in the world, and in Africa, in particular, have suffered a painful infliction of gender-based oddities from, mainly, their male counterparts. In Africa, these misogynistic tendencies are usually heightened by the misappropriation of cultural values by some parochial individuals for their own selfish benefit. This paper endeavours to cultivate the spirit of African national unity by eradicating gender complexities through employing Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) as a mirror. It is undergirded by the Womanist theory with qualitative research approach as its anchor. *Purple Hibiscus* was purposively sampled from other novels by Adichie because of its aptness to the study. Narrative textual analysis was used to examine the novel. Adichie's novel proposes to policy crafters in Africa to enhance their gender policies with water-tight clauses which should aim to equip women for a united Africa.

Key words: national unity, complexities, womanist theory, misogynistic, cultivate, gender policies

Introduction

Adichie's novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is a representation of a 'coming-of-age' novel because it is centred on the growth of the protagonist Kambili from her youth to adulthood. It is written in the view of fifteen-year-old Kambili who narrates the experiences of living under the draconian laws of her abusive Catholic father. Kambili sees life in a different light when she visits her aunt Ifeoma, who is also Catholic but lives a more liberal life as would be unexpected, especially for a woman. This chapter aims to compare and contrast the characters of the women in *Purple Hibiscus*, both the young and old, Kambili as the opposite of Amaka and Beatrice as opposed to Ifeoma. Ijeoma (2015:427) remarks that women are portrayed as sex objects, inferior beings and those that must obey the rules made by men in most African novels. These characters are examined according to how the patriarchal conditions that they live in imprison and liberate them as individuals and members of their communities.

According to Klingorova and Havlicek (2015:15), the status of women in society is an outcome of the interpretation of religious texts and of the cultural institutional set-up of religious communities.

Theoretical Underpinning

This paper is grounded on a Womanism theory which deal with the defence of the rights of people from all sexual orientations, with women pivoted. It (the paper) further employs Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as an instrument to eradicate gender complexities for the cultivation of the spirit of national unity in Africa. Walker (2004), whose brainchild this theory is, defines a womanist as (a) a black feminist or feminist of colour, (b) who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually, (c) appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength and (d), one who is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Izgarjan and Markov (2012) purport that at the centre of womanism is the concern for women and their role in their immediate surroundings (be it family, local community or work place) and more global environment. Qualitative research approach, informed by narrative textual analysis, was utilised to guide the study. Narrative textual analysis has helped accentuate the researchers examination of the sampled text. *Purple Hibiscus* was purposively sampled from other novels by Adichie because of its germaneness to the study.

Narrative Textual Analysis of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Kambili vs Amaka

Kambili

Kambili narrates her experiences of living in different environments which one would expect to be similar since both environments are of Catholic belief, but to her surprise, they are not the same. One environment is

her suffocating home under the rule of her father Eugene, while the other environment which is more free and democratic is her aunt's house which is headed by aunt Ifeoma because she is not married, both families are Catholic but carry out different principles and standards of living. Kambili is the first born of her parents, followed by her brother Jaja. They live under harsh and strict conditions set by their autocratic Catholic father who frequently goes to extremes in how he leads his family while grounding his leadership role on the Bible. Kambili narrates that the silence in her family has existed for a long time "...Jaja, Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than our lips" (16). Speaking with their spirits shows internalised words that could not be brought out externally due to the fear or constraints generated by their hostile environment. It was a norm in the Achike home that not much is said through the lips. This was metaphorically done in order to maintain a peaceful religious family.

One aspect that is evident about Kambili right at the beginning of the novel is her yearning to always earn approval from her father and mother even though sometimes it was at the expense of protecting her father to the extent of not expressing any wrongs that he might have done. This goes against some of the goals of feminism whose objective is to assure women that their decisions about what they love, what they do not enjoy, plans for their lives and others are totally up to them. Throughout the novel, one notices how Kambili always strove to gain her father's approval.

One day when the Achike family is sitting in the living room with a paper that carried a story on corruption, Kambili says "God will deliver us, I said, knowing Papa would like my saying that" (26). After that her father nodded in agreement and the satisfaction of knowing that she made her father proud in what she said is compared to "melting sugar" in Kambili's mouth. Even instances that might come out as small, Kambili jumped at an opportunity to please her father by basing her statements on God.

Also, when schools closed for Christmas vacations, and learners received their report cards, Kambili peered and saw that she topped the class. That night she fell asleep with the image of her in her father's arms, the image's face had lit up and Kambili imagined the sound of her father telling her how proud he was (53). Eugene encouraged education in both his children and always expected them to perform better than their peers at school. He is a typical example of a traditional man who practises public patriarchy in that though he encouraged Kambili to be the best student at school, her mental state was held hostage. Kambili had to go to school because her father was a well-known business man and it would be disturbing not to have his children go to school while he can afford to pay fees for both of them. Education broadens a person's perspective on life in general and leads to critical thinking but Kambili's insight and knowledge was never encouraged in her home.

When Kambili, Jaja and their mother take refuge at Ifeoma's house and Eugene calls, Kambili still feels an obligation to please her father despite the pain that he caused to his family: "I did want to talk to Papa, to hear his voice, to tell him what I had eaten and what I had prayed about so that he would approve..." (268). This stems up from what she has been taught to aspire for throughout her childhood but the reality was that, deep down she wanted to be with Father Amadi and Auntie Ifeoma and never go back to the life she has at home. She prefers the two because they afford her the space to be her real self where she is not forced to relegate her feelings for theirs.

Kambili's fear to associate her father with any wrong deed implies that she viewed him as an immortal being, or a god who can never err. Still, in her father's absence, Kambili never spoke of her father's weaknesses as if he was god who can hear everything and see everything that his children do because nothing is hidden from him. Also, this reluctance to speak ill of her father could be from the fact that Christians believe that God knows best and therefore, Kambili views her father as the image of God. This is because she believes that her father knows what his family needs even if the decision might not necessarily please them. When Jaja missed communion on two consecutive Sundays, Eugene was not pleased. He resorted to violence which most authoritarians use as a tool to instil correct behaviour or as punishment for wrong-doing. As Eugene threw a missal at Jaja, which is a liturgical book containing all instructions and texts necessary for the celebration of Mass throughout the year, he missed and hit the glass *étagère* which his wife had frequently polished and also hit the figurines of ballet dancers. Even though Beatrice acted as if the broken figurines did not matter, Kambili knew that they did because of how dedicated her mother was to polishing them. In trying to console her mother, Kambili narrates "I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, "I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama" (10). Thus, she resorted to just apologise for the broken figurines without mentioning the culprit.

Eugene is depicted as a hypocrite because though he claimed to live by Catholic rules, it appears that he did that when it best suited him. The missal is significant to the Catholic church but Eugene used it as a tool to hit Jaja as form of discipline. This incident portrays the violent side of Eugene. The act reveals double standards as done by patriarchal men who use rules which best benefit them. Eugene punished his family through the missal or Catholicism. After Beatrice greets a traditional *igwe* in a manner that is culturally expected of her, Eugene demands that his family prays for their mother's forgiveness, but when Kambili

does not do the same to another *igwe*, she is reprimanded and accused of not having the spirit of discernment as that *igwe* was a man of God.

Like Christians worship and praise God for the blessings He bestows in their lives, Kambili and her family felt an obligation to praise Eugene for the good work his company was doing so as to make him feel important and elevate him to a higher position. When Jaja did not say anything about the success of the company's new product, Kambili felt as if it was she who was silent or that Jaja would create a space for confrontation by deciding to not congratulate Papa on his achievements:

“Say something please”, I wanted to say to Jaja. He was supposed to say something now, to contribute, to compliment Papa's new product. We always did, each time an employee from one of his factories brought a product sample for us (13).

The way in which Kambili has been raised has made her blind to her father's oppressive tendencies until she visits her aunt Ifeoma experiences how differently her aunt's family treats each other. Ifeoma is also Catholic but is more open-minded than Eugene is. When Kambili goes for an outing with Pastor Amadi and her cousins, her aunt suggests that she wears pants as they would be more comfortable but she retorts to saying “... I'm fine, Aunt, I said. I wondered why I did not tell her that all my skirts stopped well past my knees, that I did not own any trousers because it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers” (80). Kambili's inability to express her own views and deprive herself of what she knew was harmful, was proof of how channelled she was. Amaka and her mother were Catholics but they wore pants, and Kambili was Catholic but had been taught to believe that it was sinful for a woman to wear pants. This incident is one of many that show the difference in how these two families carried out their Catholic beliefs.

Patriarchal societies expect women not to be vocal especially on matters that warrant a disapproval. The muting of women from a young age as girls goes further to affect the ways in which they speak. Soft speaking is one of the signs of lack of confidence or of people who are not used to talking because they are not given the platforms to. Back at Kambili's home, during meal times, talks were limited to certain conversations. When Jaja and Kambili visit their aunt, they notice something different. It is generally said that people become what they know and their routine becomes their norm. What Kambili knew was that she should not have much to say as a woman hence when her cousins spoke at the table, it seemed to her as if they just spoke with no purpose and could therefore imply that their talks were unnecessary (120). Kambili further narrates:

“Kambili, is something wrong with the food?” Aunt Ifeoma asked, startling me. I had felt as if I were not there, that I was just observing a table where you could say anything at any time to anyone, where the air was free for you to breathe as you wished (120).

It is important to notice the choice of the word ‘air’ which can be translated to mean the atmosphere or mood. Kambili could have said this because of the importance of breathing and how suffocating it can be not to breathe whenever one wants to, bearing in mind how essential breathing is to human survival. Again, she could be referring to the free atmosphere and space where everyone can raise their opinions without fear of being condemned. Back at home, Kambili and her mother mostly watched what they say and to whom they said it. This impaired their expression skills.

Victims of silence also have a tendency of lowering their voices when they speak, probably because of the fear to even speak, fear that what they say might not be accepted or would be used against them. Unfortunately, this tendency which is what Jack (1999) terms as hostile silence, extends to the relationships that these victims build with other people other than the ones that oppress them. Amaka notices that Kambili speaks in whispers, but it had become normal to Kambili that she did not even notice that. Also, if victims do not talk in whispers, then they do not talk at all. Amaka is surprised by the low voice that Kambili uses when she talks (117), and this further leads to Kambili's inability to stand up for herself: “Oh ginidi! Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back to her!” (170).

During a quarrel between Amaka and Kambili, Ifeoma is frustrated by the fact that her niece cannot answer back to Amaka, instead she is just taking in all that Amaka says. Silenced people have no desire to stand up for themselves because of the less value that they put on themselves. Kambili's reluctance to talk back or respond to the scolding words of her cousin is supported by Uwakweh (1995:76), who explains that voicing defines oneself, is liberating and therapeutic. It declares an individual as a conscious being who has the ability to think and act independently. The atmosphere created by Eugene for his family has stripped the family members off their individuality because they do not act on their own thoughts but always behave in a manner that would please Eugene. Consequently, Kambili is unable to defend herself or her reason for how she acts because she has become accustomed to putting other people's needs above hers. She does not belong even to herself and has, therefore, no sense of ownership. She avers: “I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way they did, but my lips held stubbornly together” (141). It is not that Kambili was content with the way she carried herself but that she

wished to be like her cousins. But, it was hard for her to act out of the set principles that she had been taught to live according to.

When Amaka's friends visited, Kambili wanted to join in their conversations and do what they did but "her lips held stubbornly together: I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way they did, but my lips held stubbornly together (141)". This indicates confinement because Kambili was unable to relate even with her peers and could therefore, not have fun. In order for her not to embarrass herself by stuttering, she runs to the toilet which leads to further isolation. Kambili's inability to fit in due to her muted tongue leads to her alienation, which is another result of forced silence.

Eugene takes away any shred of ability from his family to take their own decisions, to follow their hearts' desire. He is so domineering that he takes decisions even on matters that do not need his input. When every child completes their basic education, they start thinking about where they would love to further their studies. After the education phase, individuals go on to seek possible work places. In a conversation about university between Ifeoma, Amaka and Kambili, it is evident that Amaka already has a plan for her future while Kambili has not even thought about where and what she would study but rather avers "when the time came, Papa would decide" (130). Kambili is most likely to study for a profession that she has no interest in which will be a form of torture and above that, she might find herself in an institution that limits her individuality. This is a form of psychological and physical prison caused by being denied the opportunity to decide on issues relating to one's future.

When Eugene finally dies, it becomes hard for Kambili to comprehend it because of how she viewed him. She states: "I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker; from all the other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal (287)". Kambili's mixed feelings about the death of her father explains the reason why she has allowed herself to endure all that her father put them through. She did not view him as an equal human being to them but one that was above them all. This justified their submission to his rules. The period that Kambili and Jaja spent with their cousins proved to be therapeutic because after a long time when they are together, Kambili laughs, and Jaja laughs too. "It seemed so easy now, laughter. So many things seemed easy now", Kambili concedes.

Amaka

Amaka is Kambili's cousin who is raised in a free environment because her liberated mother, Ifeoma, has passed the spirit of liberation onto her children. In comparison to Kambili, Amaka is able to express her opinions and is not scared to disagree with anything that she did not approve of. Just as Kambili notices a certain character in her aunt Ifeoma, she also notices something about her cousin Amaka:

Only her eyes were differently; they did not have the unconditional warmth of Aunt Ifeoma's. They were quizzical eyes, eyes that asked many questions and did not accept many answers (78).

'Quizzical eyes' could imply that Amaka was an inquisitive child. Unless she understood something, she would ask questions in order to get clarity even if it meant getting into a debate with her elders. When the time comes for Amaka to be confirmed as is Catholic practice, it is expected of her to adopt an English name because according to Amaka, "when the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough" (272). The missionaries believed that African names were not Godly and anyway, they were unable to pronounce them. Amaka believes that they ought to be moving ahead more because Nigeria was no longer under the colonial rule because forcing her to take an English name would be confining herself to mental slavery. Amaka speaks like a liberated person who refuses to live under the legacy of colonialism.

Back at Kambili's home, no one contests Eugene's decision and also, there is no platform for one to present their own point of view. Kambili lives in a world where it is a taboo for women to have freedom of speech. Seeing Amaka speak so freely puts Kambili in awe. "I wonder how she did it, how she opened her mouth and had words flow easily out" (99). Kambili admires her cousin's fearless personality because she makes having a voice an easy thing.

When Amaka is initially given the choice to decide on an English name, she, with no reluctance, tells Father Amadi that she will not take an English name. This conversation drags on for so long and turns into a debate until Ifeoma gets annoyed and also tried to convince Amaka into taking the name even if it meant her not using it, for peace sake. But, Amaka still refuses and on the Easter Sunday, she does not join the rest of the young people. What Amaka does can be mistaken for a non-conformist rebellion but she does not care, nevertheless, how her own mother and mostly Father Amadi feel about it. It is her own decision, she stands firm on it.

It is part of good etiquette not to talk during meals at the table. Kambili is taken aback by her cousin's behaviour when she says, "I wished Amaka would keep her voice low. I was not used to this kind of conversation at the table" (97). Amaka is asking if back at Kambili's house they always ate with forks and knives. This makes Kambili uncomfortable and would rather avoid engaging with Amaka's question. It also serves as another example that Amaka always goes against the grain by opting to act out of the ordinary. Amaka is constantly compared to her cousin Kambili. When Amaka is talking to Father Amadi about what she believes are lies bought by missionaries, Father Amadi says:

"See how your cousin sits quiet and watches?" Father Amadi asked, gesturing to me. "She does not waste her energy in picking neverending arguments. But there is a lot going on in her mind, I can tell" (173).

When Papa-Nnukwu dies, Amaka is badly affected because she was close to him. This is the first time that Kambili sees her cousin at her weakest:

"Then I heard Amaka's sobbing. It was not loud and throaty; she laughed the way she cried. She had not learned the art of silent crying; she had not needed to" (185).

Most of Amaka's narrations show resilience and strength, because she is a young woman who stands up for what she believes in regardless of who she has to disagree with, it was not people she fears but not being truthful to what she believes in. Amaka's character is the total opposite of Kambili, a major distinguishing factor of their difference is how they are raised. According to Shangase (2000), the nurturing of patriarchy begins in childhood when young girls are socialised on how to address men in their marriages as well as men in general.

Beatrice versus Ifeoma

Beatrice is Eugene's wife and Kambili's mother while Ifeoma is Eugene's sister and mother to Amaka. Ijeoma (2015) explains that Adichie portrays Beatrice as a good woman and Ifeoma as a real woman. The Nigerian community where Mama comes from sees a good woman as one who "suffers the effects of oppression and neglect and who must maintain a silence and passivity in order to remain good. Silence and passivity are two principal features of a good woman" (Udumukwu, 2007:03). On the other hand, the real woman is one who does not conform to the gender stereotypes set by patriarchal societies. She expresses her ideas and stands for what she believes in, which, at times, is misconstrued for disrespect.

Beatrice

Beatrice represents a patriarchal society's construction of a good woman. According to Udumukwu (2007:03), a good African woman must remain silent and submissive under any oppressive circumstances especially those that take place in her home. While silent, she must also be passive and endure all.

Van Vlaenderen and Cakwe (2003:70) contend that African traditional societies build women's identity strictly in terms of their statuses as wives and mothers. This character is not clearly defined apart from her family and home as a wife and mother. This contributes to the way in which this character endures hardships because if stripped away from her family, she will most likely not have an identity or reason to exist. Everything that she does revolves around her husband and children. Even though African feminism believes and advocates for unity amongst men and women, it is also rooted in women as wives and mothers. It, however, furthermore seeks to empower women to have an identity apart from mothers or wives (Goredema, 2010:34):

Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? She did not wait for Aunty Ifeoma to respond (250).

When Ifeoma tries to tell Beatrice to leave Eugene because their marriage is toxic, Beatrice cannot imagine herself living anywhere other than in Eugene's house because it is her comfort zone. Beatrice has also grown into an identity as a mother and wife. Therefore, if she leaves her husband's home, she would be stripped off an identity that she has grown to nurture over the years. She chooses to remain with Eugene even if it means enduring all kinds of abuse.

Even though Ifeoma is Eugene's sister, she constantly tries to show Beatrice that she is not obligated to endure the suffering inflicted on her by Eugene, and that there is a possibility of a better and free life for her. Beatrice seems to be blind to her own oppression. Many patriarchal societies believe that it is of no use for a woman to get educated. This is the reason why Beatrice always calls Ifeoma's talks 'university talk' when Beatrice tries to show her that a woman can be liberated:

"So you say. A woman with children and no husband, what is that?"
"Me."

Mama shook her head. “You have come again, Ifeoma. You know what I mean. How can a woman live like that?” Mama’s eyes had grown round, taking up more space on her face.

“*Nwunye m*, sometimes life begins when marriage ends.”

“You and our university talk. Is this what you tell our students?” Mama was smiling (75).

According to Ogunyemi (1988:65), womanism, as a strand of feminism, is black-centred and is accommodative. While it believes in the freedom and independence of women just like feminism, unlike radical feminism, it seeks to form meaningful unions between black men and women, and children. Beatrice is a black woman who, unfortunately, has no idea how to create a harmonious unity among the people that she cares about and her individual needs.

Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2005:107) explains that “the construction of strength allows both onlookers and a woman herself to de-emphasise her struggle, to detach from any assistance and to turn a blind eye to the real oppression in the context she is facing”. When Ifeoma confronts Beatrice to take a stand and counteract her abusive situation, Beatrice always made up excuses and reasons to condone the abuse or blame herself for the cause of the treatment she suffers from her husband.

Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying a bride price.

And so? I ask you, and so? Aunty Ifeoma was shouting now (250).

Ifeoma believes that it is preposterous for her sister-in-law to suffer in silence because of what her husband does for her. Beatrice does not consider leaving her husband because she feels indebted to him since he did not take another wife when he was advised to, she thinks that it will be ungrateful of her to do so:

...you know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper.

The members of our *umunna* even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else...but your father stayed with me, with us (20).

Beatrice explained to her daughter how the villagers wanted her father to marry another wife when she could not give birth. Ijeoma (2015:432) remarks that for this reason, Beatrice felt indebted to her husband regardless of what happens, even to the detriment of her life. Hooks (2000:02) indicates that women who are mentally, physically and spiritually assaulted are marked by the fact that they accept their lot in life without questioning, without organised protest or collective anger or rage.

According to Corneliussen (2012:08), by accepting forms of abuse in order to be good women, victims are effectively silenced and reduced to devoted, submissive servants in their own homes. This is evident when Beatrice willingly and fully takes on chores that were not for her to perform for which she does not mind. Kambili comments “it was not proper to let an elder person do your chores, but Mama did not mind; there was so much that she did not mind” (19). Victims of abuse often feel obliged to always work hard without complaining because they feel a need to always be the good person for everyone else but themselves:

If Papa felt Jaja or me beginning to drift off at the thirteenth recitation of the Plea to St.

Jude, he suggested we start all over. We had to get it right. I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for (36).

Beatrice frequently blames Ifeoma’s education for how she views life differently and how she deals with issues. This is a reflection that education is one of the major liberators of women from abuse. “University talk again. A husband crowns a woman’s life, Ifeoma. It is what they want. It is what they think they want. But how can I blame them?” (75). Ifeoma acknowledges that men are also victims of patriarchy hence they think that they want women to be seen as their crowns, and they are sometimes not to blame, but the system is. Beatrice’s view gives the impression that there is a difference between women who attained university education and those who did not, in the way they behave and perceive phenomena.

Mama had greeted the *igwe* in the traditional way that women should do by bending low and offering him her back so that he would put it with his fan made of the soft, straw-coloured tail of an animal. Back home that night, Papa told Mama that it was sinful. You did not bow to another human being. It was an ungodly tradition, bowing to an *igwe*. So, a few days later, when we went to see the bishop at Awka, I did not kneel to kiss his ring. I wanted to make Papa proud. But Papa yanked me in the ear and said I did not have the spirit of discernment: the bishop was a man of God; the *Igwe* was merely a traditional ruler (94).

Sims (2016:69) explains that Christian women whom she labels as “daughters of Eve” are to look to male headship for guidance and permission, especially in the public sphere, as they are too easily misguided.

When Mama bowed to the chief without Papa's consent, it was considered to be sinful just as Eve was deceived by the serpent in the garden of Eden in the absence of Adam. Patriarchal religious structures use the sin of Eve in Eden as a reference for legitimising female supervision all the time.

In a household, certain matters are mainly the woman's business while others are of the man. Things such as house décor and furnishings are traditionally known to be the woman's department but when the Achikes' have to change curtains, "Kevin brought samples for Mama to look at, and she picked some and showed Papa, so he could make the final decision. Papa usually chose her favourite" (192). Eugene could have easily let his wife make such decisions but he did not want to give her any sense of power or to make a final decision in any matter, despite how small it could have been.

After Eugene broke a table on his wife's pregnant belly and caused her a miscarriage, Beatrice and the children flee to Ifeoma for refuge. While they are there, Eugene calls but Ifeoma tells him where to get off. She does not let him talk to his wife and children. To Ifeoma's surprise, Beatrice takes the phone from her and speaks to Eugene and agrees that he comes to fetch them the next day. Going back to the abuser is a feature of abused victims because it could either be out of fear or having made an abusive life their norm. It is as if such victims do not know any other way of life outside abuse.

Finally, Beatrice breaks the chains of her repression by filing for divorce. Since it is a taboo to divorce in patriarchal traditional African societies and also sinful according to the Bible, the only way for her to be freed from her husband is for one to die. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2009:125) postulates that victims of abuse go through breakdowns which can be in the form of leaving home for longer than usual, staying in bed or take other drastic and sudden measures in order to escape their responsibilities to others. The only possible way out for Beatrice was that she murders her husband:

When she spoke, her voice was just as calm and slow. I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (290).

When Beatrice poisons Eugene, Adichie shows that keeping quiet does not mean that the victim accepts the oppression but rather silence comes from fear and a sense of racial loyalty. Beatrice fears to dishonour her husband after he stayed with her and did not take another wife even when he was advised to, but also, she feels a sense of loyalty towards her husband. Eugene's death brings freedom to his family because silence had become a normal aspect of their home hence Kambili says:

"...silence hangs over us, but it is a different kind of silence, one that lets me breathe. I have nightmares about the other kind, the silence of when Papa was alive" (305).

The transition of how they used to be suffocated into silence is not an easy one but the silence that lies on after Eugene's death is not as imprisoning as before. Even though Kambili is hopeful for change, the damage done might be irreversible or there shall always be a constant reminder:

Perhaps we will talk more with time, or perhaps we never will be able to say it all, to clothe things in words, things that have long been naked (306).

Ifeoma

Aunty Ifeoma's character is the opposite of her sister-in-law, Beatrice's, in that Ifeoma speaks her mind and refuses to conform to patriarchal laws. Ijeoma (2015:427) and Udumukwu (2007) describe two kinds of women who are delineated in Adichie's novel, which are the "good woman" and the "real woman". Udumukwu explains the good woman as one who is characterised by silence and passivity. From this explanation, it is evident that Beatrice embodies the character of a good woman while Ifeoma is the direct opposite. Ifeoma has certain traits about her that shakes Kambili. For one, she speaks in a way that gives Kambili a "knot in her throat" because of the way in which Aunt Ifeoma speaks to Eugene (98). She is not scared to express herself even if it meant displeasing Eugene. This terrified Kambili because she has never heard anyone stand up to her father. Also, from the manner in which Kambili speaks about her aunt, it can be deduced that Ifeoma is fearless, even after a moment of weakness she would go back to her normal self of having "no sense of fear" (189).

A good woman, as usually described by African or patriarchal societies, is one who listens to what she is told by the men in her life, firstly, by her father then on to her husband and sometimes her brothers or sons. As an educated and enlightened woman, Ifeoma is not moved by what the men in her life expects of her. She always acts on her own accord and decides for herself.

When Kambili and Jaja arrive at their aunt's place, Kambili notices women behaviours that she has not seen in her home. She says this about Ifeoma, "I watched every movement she made; I could not tear my ears away. It was the fearlessness about her, about the way she gestured as she spoke, the way she smiled to show that wide gap" (76). Even though Kambili conforms to the rules that her father sets out for her and her brother, she knows deep down or at least, imagines a different environment to the one she lives in. Thus,

when she sees her aunt Ifeoma bring to reality what she has always imagined, Kambili sees that it is possible for a woman to be fearless. The fact that Kambili cannot tear her ears away shows her fascination and admiration for the possibility of a world that has such bold women:

Every time Aunty Ifeoma spoke to Papa, my heart stopped, then started again in a hurry. It was the flippant tone; she did not seem to recognise that it was Papa, that he was different, special. I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut and get some of that shiny bronze lipstick on my fingers (77).

Kambili feels a sense of responsibility to ensure that her father's ego is not bruised or no one disrespects him. She is, therefore, very careful about what people say or do to her father. It is hard for her to understand how other people, especially women, could speak to her father in a way that does not make him feel as powerful and important as he wishes, and is treated by his own family.

A patriarchal society only recognises a woman as a legal minor in that they are not suitable to make decisions for themselves hence decision-making is left in the hands of the men in their lives. This leads to poor self-esteem by women because of lack of recognition. When Ifeoma speaks to her father, because he is from a patriarchal society he, highlights the fact that women are not as important as men:

Did I not go to the missionary school, too?
But you are a woman. You do not count.
Eh? so I don't count? (83)

Women are taught to aspire to be wives and mothers or to take any role that links them to the household, as it is famously said that a woman's place is the kitchen. The assertion that education is only important for males and not females is also a contributing factor to ensuring that women do not have the skills that allow them to take on any other role in the household. Even in situations where women work, especially in the postcolonial communities, high-ranked positions are seen as only suitable for men and not women. When Ifeoma's father tells his daughter that his spirit will intercede for her so that she may receive a good man to take care of her home, Ifeoma prefers that his father's spirit rather intercedes to quicken her promotion to senior lectureship position instead.

Whaley (2001:14) shows that there is some male backlash caused by women's growing desire to be more independent of men. This painful period of transition is a time of tremendous misunderstanding and hostility between the sexes but it has to be negotiated, notwithstanding.

Conclusion

Amaka and her mother Ifeoma represent new voices in the African post-colonial literature and their characters challenge the portrayal of African women as inferior, submissive and silent. On the other hand, Kambili and Beatrice portray the suppressed woman in Africa who has been confined to a prison of silence. The latter characters finally escape towards the end of the novel and offer a breakthrough for the marginalised woman even though the method of escape was extreme (poisoning Eugene). This article suggests that other methods of addressing patriarchal oppressions such as running awareness-raising and capacity-building workshops to empower both men and women on gender issues be extensively explored rather than resorting to poisoning and violent means.

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