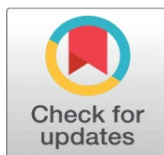
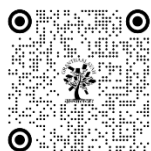


# TRAUMA, GUILT, AND THE SILENT SELF: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines *Purple Hibiscus* through a psychoanalytic lens, focusing on Kambili and Jaja's psychological development under the authoritarian and abusive influence of their father, Eugene. Eugene's religious extremism has influenced the life of the children Kambili and Jaja. The children struggle to survive their father's strict rules throughout their childhood. Applying Freudian and Lacanian theories, the study explores themes of repression, trauma, guilt, and the fragmented self. Kambili and Jaja's silence, anxiety, and eventual awakening are examined as psychological responses to familial and ideological control. Not only the children but also the mother struggled in the hands of the tyrannic father. Mama's passive submission is interpreted as neurotic behaviours shaped by repression and internalized fear.

**Keywords:** Psychology, Repression, Guilt, Anxiety, Religious Extremism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful novel exploring the internal and external forces that shape identity. A psychoanalytic approach helps to uncover the underlying traumas that shape characters' behaviours particularly Kambili and Jaja's silence, guilt, and inner conflict. Their journey is one of psychological fragmentation and healing, mirroring Freud's concept of repression and Lacan's mirror stage in the construction of selfhood.

In the novel both the children Kambili and Jaja's personality is marked by deep-seated anxiety and repression, largely due to their father's rigid control. "Say something, please, I wanted to say to Jaja. He was supposed to say something" (13). But Jaja remains silent. The children are expected to speak what the father thinks. This illustrates Freudian repression. Kambili and Jaja feels too threatening to confront the situation. Their inability to express themselves is not merely fear but a learned psychological state. their speechlessness reflects a traumatized ego, conditioned to equate expression with punishment. Father Eugene's physical abuse is cloaked in religious justification, creating deep confusion and guilt in both the children. When Jaja fails to receive communion on Palm Sunday everything changed in home "He picked up the missal and flung it across the room, toward Jaja" (7). This confusion leads to neurotic

behaviour. The children become physically ill when confronted with moral conflict, such as missing Mass, failing to take Eucharist.

Their identity is split between ideal ego and their emerging true self. Eugene's presence looms like a superego. A harsh internalized moral voice. Even when he is not physically present, Kambili and Jaja feels guilt. After their visit to grandfather's house they are taken to father Benedict for confession. During her confession when she fails to say about her visit to her grandfather father insist Kambili to tell everything and go for penance "I nodded and stared back at the wall. Was there something I had done that Father Benedict knew about that I did not know? Had Papa told him something?" (136). Kambili's need for penance aligns with Freud's theory of moral anxiety, where guilt is not proportional to the act but stems from internalized authority. Eugene has implanted in her a rigid conscience, replacing love with discipline. Under this tyrannic disciplined life, the children develop a personality marked by silence, fear, and emotional suppression. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, this internalization of trauma and fear leads to repression, where distressing thoughts and desires are buried deep in the unconscious.

One way these repressed emotions emerge is through Kambili's dreams. Her dreams are often vivid and disturbing, acting as symbolic expressions of what she cannot say or feel openly. For instance, when she dreams of her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, smiling at her, it reflects her unconscious longing for familial warmth and cultural identity, which her father forces her to reject. These dreams serve as a 'return of the repressed'. Freud's idea that repressed material eventually resurfaces, often in disguised or symbolic form.

Kambili also exhibits numerous non-verbal cues. She stutters, avoids eye contact, and suffers from stomach cramps. These physical manifestations align with Freud's theory that repressed psychological conflict can lead to psychosomatic symptoms. Her silence and muteness around her father, even when witnessing violence, is not just obedience but the result of long-term repression of fear and helplessness. When Kambili is finally exposed to an alternative, freer environment at Auntie Ifeoma's home, her body and behaviour slowly begin to respond; her dreams become clearer, and she even begins to laugh, a sign that the unconscious is beginning to heal as repression is gradually lifted. Kambili's dreams and non-verbal cues represent repressed desires and fears surfacing from the unconscious "I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a strange being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh" (179). Laughter, a spontaneous unconscious act, signals a psychic release. Her repressed self begins to surface in the freer, emotionally safe space of Nsukka. Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage' is relevant here. Both the children begin to form a self-image outside her father's gaze.

In Mama's case, her extreme submission to her abusive husband, Eugene, functions as a neurotic defence mechanism. Her calm, submissive demeanour masks a deep psychological wound. By avoiding confrontation and silencing her own pain, she creates an illusion of harmony in the household. One of the most powerful symbols of Mama's repressed trauma is her repeated miscarriages, often occurring after episodes of physical violence. This symbolizes the somatization of abuse. Her miscarriages are not merely medical events; they symbolize the destruction of her hope, identity, and femininity under patriarchal violence. Freud believed that when the mind cannot bear to process trauma, it often finds expression in the body, and Mama's body carries the burden of her silence and suffering. Her psychological pain manifests physically. There was so much fear in her eyes. She takes no courage to express her thoughts Infront of her husband. Even when she is not well, she blindly obeyed the instructions given to her by her husband. When visiting father Benedict, due to illness Beatrice request to stay back in car but Papa's cold insistence to go along with them demonstrates her inability to speak out. In essence it reveals how fear and repression shape the family's dynamics. Mama's body becomes the site of silent suffering. Like Kambili, Mama rarely speaks. Her emotional life is repressed to the point of invisibility. She expresses herself through actions, such as polishing her figurines or serving tea, maintaining rituals that give her a fragile sense of control. However, these small acts cannot mask the escalating violence. Eventually, her decision to poison Eugene, though morally complex, can be seen as a repressed psyche finally snapping, where the accumulation of years of psychological repression and bodily suffering erupts into a final, irreversible act.

By the end of the novel, Kambili and Jaja begin to undergo a profound psychological transformation. Raised in a household dominated by fear, control, and repression, their early lives were shaped by silence both imposed by their father Eugene and internalized through trauma. However, at Auntie Ifeoma's home, a space of freedom and intellectual openness, she is encouraged to speak her mind. The casual discussions at the dinner table, the laughter, and the acceptance slowly allow her to externalize what had long been repressed.

Jaja, too, begins to express defiance, beginning with his refusal to take communion. This small act of resistance is symbolic of his emerging agency. By learning to speak, both siblings are also learning to think for themselves, a direct

challenge to the totalitarian control they lived under. Their exposure to alternative environments and the experience of loss and resistance, gradually helped them to move from repression to articulation, from passivity to self-awareness, and from silence to identity.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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