

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

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ABSTRACT

Women have been fighting for gender equality and fair treatment for centuries now. However, they still have a long way to go. Recent perspectives on the resilience of women show that women have been systematically taught to negate their bodily experiences to prove their mental strength. Women enduring physical abuse in most situations do not realize their victim status. This denial could lead to more trauma when women acknowledge their traumatic experience. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie novel, *Purple Hibiscus* chronicles the life of an Igbo family in Nigeria. The difficult socio-political environment of the country augments the personal trauma of women characters in the novel. This paper analyses the aspects of gender, trauma and violence in this novel.

Keywords: Gender, Trauma, Violence, Feminism, Women

1. INTRODUCTION

It is an undeniable fact woman across the world have been facing violence in the domestic sphere. Often their inmate male partners are the perpetrators abusing women in the name of religion and tradition. The patriarchal society that women live in has often reiterated the idea that women are commodities who can be bought and exchanged. A man living with his partner exercises absolute power over her

because of this ingrained societal norm that men are superior to women and they must be 'tamed' and kept under control. Religions across the world have taught women to be subordinate to men and be the muted partner who will support her husband in his cause. A research paper on domestic violence in Ghana shows that religious beliefs and practices play a dual role in husband-to-wife abuse in Ghana, legitimizing male authority over women and entrapping victims in abusive relationships. [Adjei et al. \(2020\)](#) Male-centric language and verbose in the holy scriptures augment men's undoubted superiority over women. Women hailing from India or Africa, have been subjected to this subordination strategy of patriarchal society. Discourses on violence against women in the intimate sphere is hard to find because of the immense scrutiny it comes under and as well as questioning the validity of the testimony. The female body is both the object of sexual desire and to be controlled. Victims of physical violence of their intimate partner never acknowledge their victimhood because of covert normalization of physical abuse. Women are always taught to be dissatisfied with their bodies. [McLean et al. \(2016\)](#) This paper aims to study the effects of violence and trauma on the female body and the inscriptions that it causes on the body and mind. Women suffer on account of their bodies, and they have been systematically taught to negate their body experiences in order to preserve their image as a resilient and strong woman. This traditional coping mechanism is a deterrent to their healing process which needs them to confront the reality and accept their victim status. This paper studies how resistance and defiance aids in the healing process and reclaiming women's identities.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an emerging woman novelist from Nigeria. Her collection of works has been appreciated from all over the world. Her writings reflect Nigeria's values, customs and tradition. Her feminist voice is a proof that Nigerian women have started asserting their position of equality in all spheres of life. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful narrative of violence, trauma, political marginalization inflicted on women. The novel is set during the series of political turmoil that rocked Nigeria. The aggression in the political space adds to the aggression and intimidation in the private space.

Purple Hibiscus chronicles the life of an ethnic Igbo family living in Enugu state of Nigeria. The family's devout domineering patriarch, Eugene controls the family with an iron hand. His powerful socio-economic status vests him with absolute authority over his family members especially his wife, Beatrice. The story unfolds through the eyes of the fifteen years old daughter of the family, Kambili Achike who is a victim as well a witness to her mother's physical abuse. Her self-realization of the physical and mental trauma that she suffers is augmented when she is introduced to her cousins who lead an independent and empowered life under the upbringing of her Aunt Ifeoma. Kambili witnessing her mother's trauma is belated and delayed because of the unique way in which trauma appropriates a female body. Beatrice's physical suffering leaves a lasting trauma in Kambili that is transgenerational in its effect. As Kathleen Olympia Nader notes in her article, "Violence: Effects of Parents' Previous Trauma on Currently Traumatized Children" that

"...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 the above lines, we decipher that the transmission of unresolved trauma and helplessness is passed on transgenerationally as a result of the parent's direct trauma.

The readers are presented with several instances to show how silence and lack of language has become the intrinsic characteristics of Beatrice and her children. There's an awkward silence that hangs in the home environment. The family's dining together is as traumatic as that of getting beaten by the man of the house. Eugene is the only person allowed to open a conversation and to speak his mind without any inhibitions. Trauma can inflict a condition of linguistic disability on its victims. Words choke in Kambili's throat. Kambili is shocked when she is introduced to her Aunt Ifeoma who is a University Professor. She has never witnessed a woman talk 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 seeking of approval and validation from her father makes her assume a character that matches his expectation for her. Kambili's trauma is control based wherein her father's toxic masculinity controls and restricts her independent thought process. Religion is a potent factor that empowers patriarchy in the society and Eugene wields his power solely through the empowerment that Christian faith confers on men. As a teenager, Kambili suffered from severe psychosocial stress disorder because of the physical abuse of her father inflicted solely in the name of religion. "I was stained by failure" (39) reflects Kambili's deteriorating self-image whenever she fails to meet her father's expectations. Her father's tight slaps and punishments caused her less trauma because of her undeveloped consciousness of her reality. She is unaware of her status as a victim until she travels to Nsukka for a stay in her Aunt Ifeoma's house. She witnesses her cousins, Amaka and Obiora with strong personalities and independence. Kambili's trauma is heightened when the realisation strikes her hard with an awareness of her vulnerability. Her encounter with her grandfather, a tribal Igbo traditionalist who refused to convert to Christianity allows Kambili to question her father's ideology. The seed for defiance and resistance against her father's violent treatment and abuse is sowed after she witnesses the empowered status of her cousins. This increased awareness of her identity marks a maturity in her sexuality. Her love for Fr. Amadi demonstrates her initiation into adult life. The violent scene that unfolds when Kambili returns to Nsukka marks her new beginning for her. She was repeatedly kicked by her father by holding on to the 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)

The brutal attack of Eugene on his own daughter marks her new birth as a defiant, resilient, rebellious young woman. She is curled on the floor like the foetus about to be born with a new identity. The physical pain that her father inflicts on her female body is at once the site of memory and trauma. Her traumatic experience post her return from Nsukka is manageable because of her agency building and increased consciousness of her identity as an Igbo. Her voiceless body is testimony of parental violence perpetrated on children. Kambili's physical abuse added to witnessing her father's sadistic abuse of her mother leaves her vulnerable and

helpless. Children exposed to chronic stress and toxic environments suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). Kambili suffers from PTSD symptoms throughout her life. Her inability to make friends, claustrophobic social encounters, low self-image, a skewed understanding of her sexuality and personality disorder are some of the symptoms she suffers from.

Intimate partner Violence (IPV) is so normalized in Nigeria that there are no qualms made about it in the public sphere. Studies show that IPV is common across Nigeria, with prevalence rates varying by region, ethnicity, and community context. National surveys report that between 15% and 36% of women have experienced IPV in the past year, with even higher rates in some regions and among certain groups [Adebawale et al. \(2018\)](#). The readers' encounter with Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* starts with the shattering of her ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in the *étagère*. The figurines hold a symbolic meaning in the novel. Every time Beatrice is thrashed by her husband, Eugene, she polishes the figurines in the *étagère*. In Kambili's words, "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 holds multiple meanings. The figurines symbolize the female body. It brings to the fore the contradictory perspectives of patriarchal dominant society about women. It views the female body similar to that of the ceramic figurines which are fragile, delicate, beautiful and vulnerable. The same society beats and thrashes her if she is not subordinated to her partner. Kambili's words, "The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple avocado, she rearranged them after she polished them." (11) highlights the fact that the physical violence is very much normalized in their reality. The readers are never given an idea about the triggers of these attacks or the couple's argument that leads to these vicious encounters. Beatrice's ritual of polishing the figurines informs that she was physically assaulted by her husband. For Beatrice, the figurines also represented her family. She was working hard to keep them together. As long as the children and she behaved according to Eugene's rulebook, they were safe. But when things go awry, there is danger lurking from every corner of the house. When Eugene threw the heavy missal book aimed at his elder son, Jaja, it missed him and hit the figurines. Everything that Beatrice was safeguarding came crumbling down. "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 seems dissociated from the trauma of her children. According to trauma expert Judith Herman, victims in an acute traumatic environment develop a trance like condition. In her words,

"When a person is completely powerless, 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 has failed to protect her children from the violent punishments that Eugene had meted out on his children. Jaja lost his finger as a child, to one such brutal attack when he failed to get first rank in his class. The incident is so traumatic that he never talks about it. Kambili's rib bones are broken in another attack when she rebels against her father. Beatrice's altered consciousness is the reason behind her failure to protect her own children.

Eugene's powerful socio-economic status juxtaposed with Beatrice's disempowered position offers her very less option than to live in that toxic reality. The demands placed on her female body, whether it is reproduction, nurturing and caretaking or bearing the brunt is paramount for her. Her repeated attempts to bear

children bears testimony to this truth. Beatrice acknowledges the fact that Eugene's wealthy status in the society makes him a desirable husband for many women. "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) Beatrice's realisation of this constant threat moulds her to be grateful to her husband. The multiple miscarriages that she suffers are due to the brutal attacks of her husband. She fails to fulfill the demands of her female body due to the antithetical demands of bearing a child and getting beaten in the stomach by her husband. Any deviance from Eugene's orders would wreak havoc on Beatrice's body. Her body is invaded, injured and defiled. Beatrice's altered consciousness lets her keep calm. "Her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dumps in town..." (34) This emptiness in her emotions can be deciphered in her words too. "There was an accident, the baby is gone" (34) speaks of an immense tragedy in a language bereft of emotions. This coping technique of complete dissociation and detachment helps Beatrice to live through her traumatic abusive environment. In her constant exposure to the patriarchal value system, she has become a part of it. She disagrees with Ifeoma when the latter feels that life begins for women when marriage ends. For Beatrice, "A husband crowns a woman's life" (75) While Ifeoma represents a woman who is empowered, educated and independent the readers are offered a contrast in Beatrice's character who is disempowered, dependent on her abuser husband and lacking in courage.

Beatrice fails to emulate Ifeoma's defiant nature. She considers Ifeoma as a head strong University woman whose ideals will not suit the reality. Ifeoma's words, "Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes," Aunt Ifeoma said, "Defiance is like marijuana - it is not a bad thing when it is used right" (144). The purple hibiscus is used as a symbol of defiance in the novel. Just like how rare the purple hibiscus is, defiance shown in proper rarity can keep dominance and unwarranted violence in check. Eugene's uncontrolled anger is rooted in his faith that empowers him to act violently. His dominant faith is juxtaposed against his father's traditional faith which harnesses the power of the natural world and the respect for the ancestral world. This harmony creates a balance that is greatly missing in Eugene's life. His business, social standing, power craze and the volatile political turmoil leads to creating an inner demon within him that is unleashed on his wife. The scars on Beatrice's body are marks of vulnerability and absolute submission.

2. CONCLUSION

Beatrice embodies a 'battered woman'. She suffers repeated physical violence that are marked on her female body as scars and miscarriages. The figurine's fragility is juxtaposed with Beatrice's fragile body. Her eventual act of poisoning her husband is her act of reclaiming her agency and resolution. Kambili's mutism is another example of trauma inflicted on the female body wherein her voice itself is viewed as a defiance in a strict patriarchal society. Through her association with her Aunt Ifeoma, Kambili eventually finds her voice. Kambili is a perfect example of the typical reaction to trauma that is the delayed response and fragmented memory. The novel, *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful portrayal of how patriarchy dominates and operates in a volatile political and personal context.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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