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Patriarchal Oppression and Women's Empowerment in
Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

Opresión patriarcal y empoderamiento de la mujer en *Purple Hibiscus* de

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an analysis of the famous novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Two main issues will be discussed: the subject of patriarchal societies and the women empowerment movement, both represented by different characters of the novel, Eugene and Ifeoma.

The common factor combining these two opposite ideas will be the character of Kambili. This paper will provide an analysis on the evolution and change she suffers and how it affects her and her family. It will also discuss main issues that are present nowadays such as the salary gap between men and women and the difficulties the latter have to achieve certain jobs in some professional fields. This essay will also cover some controversial issues much discussed in society, such as religion, traditions and the confrontation between the two of them may bring to certain people. It will also deal with, and question, two opposite concepts of family represented by two different characters to later refer to the gender differences and stereotypes women suffered in Nigeria in the mid-eighties- at the time the story took place- but that are still a problem in today's society throughout the world.

In this paper, through Kambili's eyes, concerning society issues, very present nowadays, will be narrated by an innocent voice and from the perspective of a young girl. However, not only the reader will discover Kambili's personality but also her brother's Jaja and numerous cousins- such as Amaka- since all of them play a relevant role in the process of awakening Kambili. Each character of Adichie's writing helps to get acquainted with various and opposite ways of seeing life. Also, Kambili's slow development can be appreciated as the story unfolds in front of the reader. She grows and overcomes many fears and situations that are very difficult to anyone, especially for a little girl.

Key words: patriarchy, domestic violence, Nigerian women, religion, family secrets, women's empowerment.

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003 when she was still a student at the University of Connecticut. Almost twenty years later it is still an indispensable novel to understand nowadays postcolonial world. Adichie was born in Abba but later she moved to Nsukka as both her parents were linked to the University there. She then went to the United States, where she attended University and started publishing her works. *Purple Hibiscus* is her first novel, an *opera prima* which was well received by the critics. She later published other novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) or *Americanah* (2013). In her work Chimamanda describes the problems any given society faces, usually from the point of view of women and black people. She gives visibility to identity issues and she is determined to change the current vision that history, throughout the years, has given to countries like Nigeria. In many of her interviews and Ted Talks she talks about the importance of visibility, of giving young girls a reference they can look up to. She grew up missing that reference and she found herself lost many times in a world where novels were usually written by white males and took place in the western world where the beauty canon did not include dark skinned girls like her. Her feminist point of view, which permeates her novels, as well as a great illustrative image of society makes all her stories extremely interesting and quite rebellious.

In *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie is able to fully portray the problem of domestic violence. A complicated issue that affects many women and children throughout the world and continues to be considered taboo in a lot of cultures. She is also able to depict the problems Nigerian society has gone through, from corruption to the importance of traditions and the confrontation with religion, which are recurrent themes. Through the eyes of Kambili, the reader is transported to Enugu, Nsukka or Abba and experiences with the protagonist, the

violence she suffers at home, her father's authoritarian character as well as the love for her aunt. The vision that this story gives about women empowerment does not go unnoticed. Therefore, the aims of this paper will be: a) to analyze the patriarchal oppression, through the figure of Eugene, Kambili's father; b) focus on the feminist point of view portrayed by the figure of aunty Ifeoma and c) to examine how and to what extent, the two of them collide and affect Kambili.

To be able to do this, this paper is divided into two different sections. The first one will focus on the fear and submission associated with the figure of Papa, Eugene. More specifically, this section will explain the suffocating environment the main character and her family live in and the importance her dad has on her life, as well as the different types of violence that Eugene exerts on his children and wife. The second section will discuss the figure of Aunty Ifeoma and the empowerment of women she represents, as well as how she offers Kambili and Jaja a different life and shows them alternative values that will change their way of thinking and living.

2. Fear and submission

Through the figure of Eugene and how Kambili sees him I will explain the situation the family is living in. This situation serves as an example of many other cases of violence perpetrated by the male figure, not only in Nigeria but in the rest of the world. The story is set in Enugu where Kambili lives with her parents and big brother Jaja. The relationship Kambili has with her father is quite complicated because despite his violent personality, he is one of the richest, best admired and most influential personalities in Nigeria. Thus, Eugene exemplifies the stereotypical male figure of an oppressive and patriarchal society. Moreover, he is a staunch Catholic to the point that his devotion to this religion becomes obsessive. His beliefs blind him to the point that he rejects his own father for not sharing them, and he detests the way father Amadi preaches in church because of his freedom of expression and his embracing of different cultures as the priest demonstrates on Sunday Mass. For Eugene, this embracing and mix of cultures is an insult to the purity of his religion. According to him:

That young priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him (Adichie 29).¹

Furthermore, Eugene shows a deranged and irrational disgust to any pagan tradition or cultural sign. For example, he always wears western suits and he rejects any cultural attire. To make things even clearer, he speaks with a slight English accent (46), even though he was born and raised in Nigeria. Instead of embracing his own roots. Eugene tries really hard to hide them so that no one could even think of them. This may easily create a profound mental discomfort as he obsessively keeps repressing an essential part of his personality to such an extent that it leads him to feel lost and misunderstood.

¹ From now on when referring to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* I will only provide page number.

As Marcus Garvey once said, “a people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.” This quote by the famous Jamaican journalist born in 1887 and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, perfectly explains how Eugene and people who reject their own culture live. More important, though, Eugene’s own cultural illiteracy will deeply affect Kambili and Jaja as they have no knowledge of their own identity; their culture has been so canceled by their father that they do not really know anything about it, and they feel lost in a world where the only reference they receive is the irrational anger of their father. To be able to explain the situation that Kambili and each member of the family suffer I will start by referring to some traits of Nigeria's patriarchal society as well as the power Eugene shows just for being a male and the head of the family.

2.1 Society and patriarchy

As mentioned above, our story is set in Nigeria, a country of 201 million people. More precisely, the story takes place in Enugu, Abba and Nsukka. The first thing that the reader should know about the situation of Nigeria is that it is a patriarchal society in which men and women develop different roles because of their respective genders. In this country, set in the West coast of the African continent, in the Gulf of Guinea, men are leaders and dictators and women get relegated to a secondary position.

Women in Nigeria are less likely to be active in the labour market; more likely to be in lower-earning opportunities like farming and informal jobs; and earn less for a given level of education and experience than men of the same level (Gender Roles and Inequalities in the Nigerian Labour Market, 2).

Even though there are exceptions where women occupy positions of power and are as highly qualified as men are. Just to name some, women such as Ngozi Okonwo-Iweala, who

is the first woman to lead the World Trade Organization (WTO) or Kayafat Sanni, who in 2019 became the first female pilot in the Nigerian Airforce, have become important role models for Nigerian women. This situation comes from a long fight that has still not ended completely since most women find it very difficult to achieve such success.

Through Eugene's family, Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja, Adichie portrays the reality of many women and children in the country. The paternal figure is usually the representation of the family in patriarchal societies, in this case Eugene, who is not only the father and face of the household but he is also a very important man with power and wealth which provides him with even more personal strength and social and economic validation. From the beginning *Purple Hibiscus* reflects a clear image of the different jobs that the majority of men and women are assigned in a country like Nigeria. While Eugene runs a company and a newspaper and schedules important meetings in his home office, his wife, Beatrice, helps to cook dinner or meets with other wives to talk about various domestic or superficial topics (21). She is not allowed to interfere or even ask what her husband is doing, because she has been taught by her own mother before her what her place is in society and she has accepted it. On her part, Kambili has grown up witnessing these gender differences. Even though she can study at a prestigious school where her father wants her to be the first in her class, this is not as an instance of feminist empowerment but to push her away from any sign of pagan or traditionalist ideas and to deeply inculcate even more in her the idea of God and perfection. In Kambili's father words:

You have to do something with all these privileges. Because God has given you much, he expects much from you. He expects perfection. I didn't have a father who sent me to the best schools. My father spent his time worshiping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priest and sisters at the mission (47).

However, Kambili is constantly forced to remember that her role in society is to be relegated to her gender role sooner or later and that her father will guide all her decisions in life, no matter her age. And Kambili herself has learned the lesson: “I had never thought about university, where I would go or what I would study. When the time came, Papa would decide.” (130).

Her family and social environment have all inculcated this idea of how people, more precisely, men and women, must act and behave in life and his own father is the perfect example for that. However, she fears the moment when Eugene is coming home. On the one hand, she is afraid of her father and the way he behaves, the physical punishments, the way he treats her mother and, as a consequence, Kambili is constantly afraid of his father's unexpected reactions. However, it confuses her the way everyone around proclaims that her father is a kind, big-hearted man who helps the less privileged, as he does when they visit Abba where Eugene is venerated for all his utmost generosity and the sheer amount of gifts he brings with him. As it was mentioned before, Eugene also carries on with his duty as a devoted Catholic, he attends church every Sunday and offers big donations. This can be seen one of the times the whole family attended mass, after Eugene has made an important donation, and father Benedict profusely thanked Kambili's father. As she narrates it:

And I would sit with my knees pressed together, next to Jaja, trying hard to keep my face blank, to keep the pride from showing, because Papa said modesty was very important (5).

It is at moments like this when Kambili would love for everyone to know that she is Eugene's daughter, that she knows her father is capable of doing good deeds, and that she wants to show him off. But as can be easily read between the lines, it could also be said that this momentous pride she feels for her father's action could be seen as an excuse to justify or

compensate for his intractable behavior at home. More than anything in this world Kambili wishes her father would turn into a respectable man, a man she is not afraid of, a good person she can trust, instead of the abusive father who terrifies her family. However, Eugene keeps his exemplary conduct and his generosity outside his home as Kambili notices:

Father Benedict talked about things everybody already knew, about Papa making the biggest donation to Peter's pence St. Vincent de Paul. Or about Papa paying for the cartons of communion wine, for the new ovens at the convent where the Reverend Sisters baked the host for the new wing to St. Agnes (5).

To a certain extent, Kambili needs to exalt this behavior to compensate for the constant anxiety she feels at the dinner table for fear of doing something wrong and for the numerous instances when she cannot breathe the moment she hears her father's footsteps approaching on the stairs (40). As it happens within any violent and abusive scenario, this unavoidable fear conditions every relationship Kambili might have, not only with her father but also with the rest of her family and friends. She is not able to have a real relationship with her brother, who suffers the same violence, and she even thinks the two of them have a special visual connection, as a desperate act to feel understood (305).

To be able to control his family in such a way Eugene uses two kinds of violence; physical (e.g., beatings, burns), and emotional (primarily associated with religion and backed up by the patriarchal society).

2.1.1 Physical violence

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines physical violence as:

Deliberately aggressive or violent behavior by one person toward another that results in bodily injury. Physical abuse may involve such actions as punching,

kicking, biting, choking, burning, shaking, and beating, which may at times be severe enough to result in permanent damage (e.g., traumatic brain injury) or death. It is most frequently observed in relationships of trust, particularly between parents and children or between intimate partners (e.g., in a marriage).

A national survey made in 2014 with the collaboration of organizations like UNICEF states that half the children in Nigeria have suffered, between May and July 2014, physical violence and, of those, almost 90% have suffered it multiple times (52). According to *The Borgen Project* (2020), one out of three African women have experienced domestic violence, and “around 51% of African women experience beatings from their husbands”. Adichie is not shy to portray this evil in *Purple Hibiscus* through the figures of Kambili and Jaja, on the one hand, and Beatrice, on the other. Beatrice, Eugene’s wife and the mother of Kambili and Jaja lives in complete fear of her husband; however, she does not leave home or report him to the authorities. She has even normalized Eugene’s brutal beatings that have annulled her as an individual. She does not have an opinion or share her thoughts because they are not validated and considered. Furthermore, she cannot even stop her husband from beating her own children. This is not only the case of Beatrice but of thousands of women who are left alone in a corrupted society which does not protect or help them and, even if they are strong enough to speak up or complain, they get criticized and excluded, as stated by Godiya Allanana Makama in her study *Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: The Way Forward*:

The victims of violence, especially domestic violence and rape, hardly report to the appropriate authorities. For instance, wife battery is considered a private affair between the husband and wife. Moreover, the tradition or culture and religious beliefs in Nigeria as a typical patriarchal society see the wife as a property of her husband, who has the moral right to beat her as penalty for insubordination and or

perceived wrongdoing... In Nigeria, laws to protect women from violence are inadequate.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, everyone at the house (not only the family members but also the driver and the cook) are aware of what is happening because they can hear the cries and see the marks left after the beatings. The first time that Beatrice has an abortion after Eugene's beating, Kevin brings her back to the house (34); nevertheless, no one does anything. No one makes a move and tries to stop Eugene; they watch and continue with their lives because that is normality for them. This kind of behavior also changes the roles of the family members. In a traditional family, the mother is supposed to be the caring and protective figure that helps her children, the person her children go to when they have a problem and need help. However, for Kambili and Jaja their mother is someone they have to protect and look after. This can be seen when Kambili tells Jaja that their mother is pregnant; the first thing that Jaja says is that they do not only have to protect their mother but their new soon-to-be sibling: "Jaja closed his eyes for a while and then opened them. -We will take care of the baby; we will protect him" (23).

The extreme fear Kambili and Jaja constantly experience forces them to become parents of their own mother. It also robs the children's childhood out of them.

Beatrice can be seen as a puppet that has no life because her husband has taken it away from her, she is someone who has been so blinded by this situation of violence that she is not able to stop it at all, even when her own children are in real danger. A crucial point of inflection in the novel takes place when Eugene beats his daughter Kambili and sends her to the hospital just because she has a picture of her grandfather (209). This is the moment when Eugene's violence gets totally out of control and it is even noticed outside the family home. As in most abusive relationships, Adichie describes how only the people outside the

household perceive the situation as it is. As mentioned before, the family members are unable to resist and their employees are not likely to intervene, so it is only Ifeoma and father Amadi the ones who want to act and stop Eugene once the cat is out of the bag. In contrast, the only thing Beatrice can say after her daughter has been brutally attacked by her father sounds as an excuse for Eugene: “It has never happened like this before” (214).

This does not mean that Beatrice does not love her daughter Kambili. The problem is that she is incapable of handling the situation because she has been reduced to nothing and Eugene is the one to blame for Beatrice’s annulment. Thus, she reacts as many other battered women do. She excuses Eugene; she forces herself to believe it was a mistake, something unusual, as the quote above illustrates. Likewise, Kambili does not change her behavior after the brutal beating, she does not rebel against her father or confront him when he seems to feel vulnerable after the beating (212). Once again, and as most victims of physical abuse, Kambili thinks she surely did something wrong by having that picture and she is even capable of understanding her father’s acts against her.

This reinforces the cycle that leads Kambili to live the same life her mother is living. That is, what might be at stake for Kambili is a violent life completely dominated by an abusive male figure, her father, and probably later, her husband. Following the national survey mentioned by UNICEF (2014), less than half the children who have experienced physical violence tell someone about it (67). Children are often led to feel that it was not a problem: some mention that it was their fault, and others tend to be afraid of the consequences if they tell. These children that do not seek help are more likely to repeat the situation they are exposed to and once again suffer the consequences of this violence (70).

2.1.2 Emotional violence

The APA Dictionary of Psychology describes emotional violence as:

a pattern of behavior in which one person deliberately and repeatedly subjects another to nonphysical acts that are detrimental to behavioral and affective functioning and overall mental well-being.

At first sight, this type of violence might seem less aggressive than the physical one, but it leaves an equally pernicious footprint on people's mental health. A key challenge to notice this violence is that it does not usually leave any physical trace, any bruises or wounds to attest to what the person has suffered; so, in the end many victims of emotional abuse do not blame the perpetrator. Women and children are often not totally aware of the fact that they are suffering any kind of emotional abuse as it is more subtle than the physical one. As it will be shown later, in Adichie's novel, Eugene uses his patriarchy-derived power and his twisted understanding of Christian beliefs to punish his family emotionally. According to the UNICEF survey mentioned earlier, one out of six females and one out of five males suffer physical violence from a young age, while 80% suffer continuous incidents throughout their lives such as intimidation (54). As for women, it is even more difficult to give clear data about how many suffer emotional abuse at the hands of their husbands because a big percentage have internalized this type of abuse and they do not consider it a violent act.

Society, religion and education are absolutely important when talking about this kind of violence. To analyze emotional abuse, I will start by talking about society and the outrageous impact it has on people's thoughts and decisions. Throughout the novel, it is clearly noticed how Kambili, Jaja and her mother, Beatrice, are all under the influence of emotional abuse. One of the first episodes in which the reader may notice to what extent the environment they are living in makes an impact on them is when Beatrice tells Kambili how Eugene stayed with her while she could not get pregnant and did not leave her: “[when] I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our umunna event sent

people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else ...But your father stayed with us” (20).

Women have traditionally been told they are expected to have children, to have a successful marriage and a happy life; which relegates them to being just reproductive organs. Also, when they struggle to conceive, as in Beatrice's case, the man's fertility is never questioned, so the person found responsible is always the woman. Consequently, as seen in the passage above, Beatrice feels grateful that Eugene stood by her and did not leave her for any other woman, even when everyone told him to do so. She does not even pause to consider that she might not even be the problem. Society has inculcated her the idea that she should be punished and excluded for not being able to conceive a child. Her life would have been finished if Eugene had left her due to her impossibility to have children. As Amaka Elochukwu claims in her article *Stigma and Mental Health Impact of Divorce on Women: A Nigerian Perspective*, divorced women have been, and still are, quite discriminated against in Nigerian society, more specifically in the *Igbo* clan, from which the characters of the novel are. According to Elochukwu:

Divorce is often seen as such a taboo coupled with religious factors that women prefer to stay in dysfunctional marriage over getting a divorce. Divorced women are often seen as second-hand/inferior, troublesome and the cause of the failed marriage. Sometimes they don't receive support even from their immediate family members who prefer to join others to persecute and humiliate them.

Consequently, Beatrice becomes a prisoner in her marriage and her children, Jaja's and Kambili's need for caring love are neglected. Moreover, she also transmits to her daughter the idea of what a woman should embody. And that is someone who must stay by her husband's even though she might feel miserable and frightened at every moment of her

life because, for her, there is no other option, as she tells Ifeoma (75). The fear they all live in permeates every action they do and even every thought they have, not letting them grow as a person because they do not happen to live within an understanding environment. The growing fear they feel for Eugene is so pervasive that he does not even need to shout or get angry to cause this panic to spread among his wife and his children. The episode when Beatrice is pregnant and so tired that she prefers to stay in the car instead of paying a visit to Father Benedict at his house is a clear example of the power Eugene exerts on her.

-Let me stay in the car and wait, *biko*, - Mama said, leaning against the Mercedes.

- I feel vomit in my throat.

Papa turned to stare at her. I held my breath. It seemed a long moment, but it might have only been seconds.

-Are you sure you want to stay in the car? - Papa asked.

My body does not feel right- she mumbled.

-I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car.

Mama looked up. - I'll come with you. It's really not that bad (29).

Beatrice is so conscious of the consequences she will have to endure that she eventually accompanies her husband who did not even have to raise his voice to frighten her. Even her daughter, Kambili, who witnesses this scene, is worried about what may happen to her mother or to them if his father might get upset. Although psychological violence can happen on its own, when physical violence occurs, psychological abuse tends to be hand in hand. There is always the fear of a new beating, the assumption of having done something wrong after the punishment, etc.

Besides, as said before, society is not the only factor responsible for emotional abuse because for Eugene religion is also an inspiration and a cause of punishment. He is an extremely devoted man that rejects both his past and the part of the family that does not share his same beliefs. He feels religion in an absolute, strict way of being in this world: he does not allow for change or for the integration of other cultures, as they would surely “spoil” the essence of his beliefs and corrupt them (69). Being fully aware of their father’s religious extremism, both Kambili and Jaja view religion as something negative and restrictive. Religion has turned them away from their grandfather, a person they barely know, and from the traditions of their country. For them, everything that does not agree with their father’s judgment must be considered evil and that is why they feel awkward around Papa- Nnukwu to the point that Kambili herself tells Ifeoma that they consider him a pagan (81). In order not to corrupt his children with what he considers pagan rituals, Eugene hides their cultural roots from them and tries to instill his own beliefs exclusively, irrationally and obsessively. Thus, he punishes them often in the name of religion and God, so they can be left free of what he considers sins. The next quote is part of a scene when he scolds his children’s feet so God can forgive the sins they had supposedly committed: “That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet” (194).

Even an involuntary thought deviating from Eugene’s beliefs must be punished. The already mentioned point of inflection in the novel, the brutal beating of Kambili’s, starts with a seemingly innocent picture of Eugene’s father, Papa- Nnukwu that Kambili keeps in secret.

She is aware of the fact that Eugene considers her grandfather a pagan and that, as a consequence, he has prohibited everything about him in the house. Kambili gets nervous whenever she is around Papa Knuwu and she feels very self-conscious when she first gets close to him (64); she knows she is not supposed to like him and she tries hard to distance herself because she is incapable of disobeying her father. Kambili is afraid to even look at her

grandfather's picture because she knows she will be doing something forbidden and, even when she gets beaten, she has been conditioned to understand her father's reasons.

Finally, one of the main preoccupations Kambili shows throughout the story, and an important factor for this emotional abuse, is education. In Kambili's own words the shadow of his father follows her to the classroom: "I remained a backyard snob to most of my class girls until the end of the term. But I did not worry too much about that because I carried a bigger load- the worry of making sure I came first this term" (52).

As Kambili makes it clear, she does not worry about the image her classmates might have of her since she has more important concerns. Following her father's strict rules, she knows she is expected to compete with and succeed over everyone in her class, and at home. Education for her equals perfection and the only way to achieve it is by becoming the first in everything. The only semester she comes second in her class, she does not worry about what she did wrong or where she failed to get a second place but the reaction of her father when he confronts her: "I needed him to hug me close and say to whom much is given, much is also expected. I needed him to smile at me, in that way that lit up his face, that warmed something inside me. But I had came second. I was stained by failure" (39).

It is interesting to highlight that Kambili does not feel connected to other classmates, instead, she isolates herself and becomes obsessed with the idea of being the first one, not for her own good but for Eugene's satisfaction. As a consequence, Kambili's recurrent obsessions consume her to the point that she is compulsively trying to satisfy her father's extremely severe rules and expectations, not because she wants to excel and learn for herself, but because she needs to live up to her father's unattainable and maddening standards, only then he will be happy: "Papa smiles, and I wished I had said that before Jaja had" (25).

Without even realizing it, she becomes part of a contest in every aspect of her life, always competing for the attention and approval of her father. All these circumstances prevent Kambili from evolving as a person, and she remains a teenager that can barely talk to her classmates because of fear. She is seen by everyone as a quiet, well-educated and shy girl who just wants to study, go to church and be a good daughter (49). Even she buys into this image of herself; nonetheless, everything she does is because of her father's oppression. She does not really know herself or what she likes to do, but rather what she is supposed to be. To a certain point, Kambili, as many other victims of psychological abuse, is afraid of herself, of what she should say or how she should respond to an unexpected situation when her father is around.

As some studies reflect, victims that suffer emotional abuse are likely to have more difficulty with relationships as they tend to isolate themselves (Swea Jelic Tuscic et al. 24); this is the case of Kambili and her family. She is not able to fully interact with anyone, not even, at the household, even though all the members are going through the same frightening situation she suffers. In the few scenes she is alone with her mother or her brother, they barely talk and, when they do so, it is never about their most aggravating personal problems, but rather about superficial topics like food, the garden or errands they must run: "We did that often, asking each other questions whose answer we already knew. Perhaps it was so that we could not ask the other questions, the ones whose answers we did not want to know" (23).

The reader may think they want to ignore the problem so that it does not feel so oppressive; however, an alternative reading would maybe suggest that they are not quite clear as to what is happening and how to explain the different types of abuse each of them have to endure. Like many other victims around the world, they are not aware of the possibility of behaving in a different way.

Adichie wants to make it clear that every time Eugene is around or even mentioned a tense atmosphere overruns the environment. Thus, one of the first things that change when Kambili and Jaja go to live with their aunt Ifeoma is the environment and how this is perceived by them. Jaja, in particular, realizes that they do not know who they are, and they cannot fully grow if they continue living within the mental prison they know to be their home.

3. Freedom and Affection

In this section, through the figure of Aunty Ifeoma, the psychological change in Kambili and Jaja and the personal growth they acquired, while living with her and their cousins will be explained and analyzed. The first appearance of Aunty Ifeoma and the first thing Kambili hears about her is her laugh: “Her laugh floated upstairs into the living room, where I sat reading. I had not heard it in two years, but I would know that crackling, hearty sound anywhere” (71).

This short description can give the reader a glimpse of Ifeoma’s personality, since up to this point no one has laughed throughout the novel. Together with her laughter, the novel emphasizes the hug she gives her niece, as well as how tender and special it is for Kambili, as seen in the pleasant, tender memory she retains of Aunty Ifeoma. This gives just a hint about the impact this character will make in the story and in Kambili’s life: “She did not give me the usual brief side hug. She clasped me in her arms and held me tightly against the softness of her body. The wide lapels of her blue, A-line dress smelled of lavender” (71).

The description the narrator gives of Ifeoma is completely different from that of other characters the readers have already met. She dresses in multiple vibrant colors such as red, violet, blue, in contrast with Eugene who always dresses in suits, and she smells of sweet and colorful flowers. Her looks match her personality, that of a cheerful strong woman who knows how to defend herself in a patriarchal society that does not favor her. As a widowed mother of three children and an educated woman who tries to validate her job and fight for her beliefs, she does not have it easy to succeed in Nigerian society. Despite the obstacles, she gets up every day and continues her battle with an energy and a courage unknown to Kambili.

Looking at the two siblings together, society will interpret that Eugene is the one who succeeded: he has more money, a majestic house, can pay for an expensive school for his children and has an apparently perfect family. However, in order to succeed he had to give up his roots, part of his family and, also, his humanity. Aunty Ifeoma, on the other hand, shows a more complicated way of going through life; as a woman she was not in the same situation Eugene was, even as little kids. Also, in order to succeed she did not give up her roots, cultural beliefs or family. She took everything that made her vulnerable and transformed it into her strength; her beliefs are what she is and more importantly, what she will pass on to future generations.

The next sections will focus on the way Aunty Ifeoma has been mistreated by a patriarchal society. It will also deal with the difficult climbing up the stairs that many women need to tackle in order to be validated, not only by society but also within their own families too. Ifeoma's way of living her life, including her views on religion, education and family, will be paid attention. as well as the impact she will make on both Kambili and Jaja.

3.1 Society and women empowerment

As it was commented in previous sections, Nigerian society has not traditionally given the same opportunities to women and men; however, in recent years the rise of women's empowerment has changed the society's perspective about gender. Even though there still exist differences that benefit men and relegate women, a change is happening and that movement will not be put to a stop. In Nigeria, different associations and programs help women acknowledge their potential and fight stereotypes such as: *Sheleads Africa*, which helps women define their business ideas; *Nigerian Women Fund*, which aspires to awaken women's political spirit and promote the presence of more women in the governance of Nigeria; or the *Stand to Rape End Initiative*, which involves women who have suffered

sexual violence in the fight for equality. These are only three among the many associations that are starting to change the perspective about women and that are offering them new opportunities to rise and speak up. It is interesting to notice that these are not the only programs that help women; music contributes as well, as mentioned by Amaka, Kambili's cousin, a quietly rebellious character in the story. She tells Kambili about singers such as Fela, Osadebe or Onyeka who are, as she says, culturally conscious and transmit an important message in their songs (118). Recently, Nigerian singers such as Simi, (Simisola Ogunleye Kosoko) have addressed social problems in their lyrics. Trying to succeed in an industry dominated by males, female singers have stood up to fight for their rights and change the role women are expected to play in society:

Being a woman, first of all, is already a problem and then there are instances of restaurants where they say you can't come inside without a man because they assume you're a prostitute. (That has never happened to me but I have friends who have experienced it.) Or when they ask unmarried women what they are doing with their lives while viewing marriage as this achievement. And then they expect people to respect you because you're somebody's wife, not because you deserve it or your value is enough by itself. I've seen people defend me by saying things like "How can you talk to somebody's wife like that?" Like if I wasn't somebody's wife, it'd be okay to talk to me like that. So I think it's a different brand or a mutated version of sexism. But I don't think it ever really goes, you just have to keep fighting the fight, they're not going to like you" (Simi, "I just want women to win").

In the above extract from an interview, Simi sums up the idea patriarchal societies have of young women and she openly shows the desire that new generations may change it. Likewise, in Adichie's novel, Amaka or Auntie Ifeoma are upset and tired of being relegated

by men. They have their own voices and want to express their own feelings. However, expressing who they are in a society that punishes them just for their gender, is not easy. Even more if they are not financially independent and have to rely on someone else.

According to a report from the British Council, Nigeria is among the thirty most unequal countries with respect to income distribution. Women are paid less while developing the same position as men; they do not own any land, even though women's work in agriculture and farm is more intense than men's; also, loans are more likely to be denied to women than to men. This is a huge problem since women's empowerment largely depends on their independence. As mentioned in previous sections, if Beatrice leaves her husband due to his abusive behavior, she will not only have to suffer the rejection of society, including probably her own family, but she would also be left completely broken, with no income or any way of surviving, especially when her husband is so well respected by society. Another example of this existing inequality in Adichie's novel is Ifeoma, who as a widow, still goes through economic struggles and often suffers the judgment of others:

“A woman with no children and a 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? ...

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

“You and your university talk. Is this what you tell your students?” Mama was smiling.

“Seriously, yes. But they marry earlier and earlier these days. What is the use of a degree, they ask me, when we cannot find a job after graduation?”

“At least somebody will take care of them when they marry.”

“I don’t know who will take care of whom. Six girls in my first-year seminar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend, their husbands buy them stereos and textbooks and refrigerators, and when they graduate, the husbands own them and their degrees. Don’t you see?”
(75).

This dialogue between Beatrice and Ifeoma clearly portrays two opposite ways of thinking. Beatrice gives great importance to having someone by her side, and she cannot conceive the idea of being alone with her children in the society they live in. However, Ifeoma shows a very different opinion; she is a woman that values and enjoys her independence. She wants her students equally free and she offers a clear image of what most marriages in her patriarchal society end up like. She sees her female students lose interest in their studies when they get married (at a very young age) without being able to fully experience life as individuals, not just as a compliment to someone. She does not need to be someone’s wife; she feels confident being herself and she inculcates to her students and her own children that they can be complete without a partner; something Beatrice cannot or will not accept.

3.2 Family and traditions

Family is important for Ifeoma, not only because she desires to create a special bond between her children and her nephew and niece, but also with her father. In a society like Nigeria, women’s greatest responsibility is to take care of their families and they do not expect any recognition for what they see as their duty. Ifeoma is an outstanding example of this situation. Although she has less economic resources than her brother Eugene, she makes an astounding effort to support and take care of her father by herself. The psychological load

she has to carry in order not to feel guilty for leaving her father unattended can be seen throughout the story. For example, when Papa-Nnukwu is very sick and Aunty Ifeoma has to take care of him with very few medical resources, she wonders:

I don't have enough fuel in the car to reach even Ninth Mile, and I don't know when fuel will come. I cannot afford to charter a taxi. If I take public transport, how will I bring back a sick old man in those buses so packed with people your face is in the next person's smelly armpit?" Aunty Ifeoma shook her head. "I'm tired. I am so tired... (149).

She is absolutely tired of searching for solutions in a society that does not help her in any way. According to a study from The National Partnership for Women and Families (2018), more than half of the caregivers in the world are females in their 40s or 50s, who, together with a full-time job, take care of an elder relative. They usually have children too, which makes their workload at home difficult to bear. As the study says, female caretakers often suffer an impact on their mental health as they usually have to deal with economic issues as well as the responsibility to nurse and care for their relatives. In Ifeoma's case, it is even worse as the health care and medical resources in Nigeria, portrayed in the novel, are a handicap that she must overcome without any help. On some occasions, even her father does not fully appreciate his daughter's efforts because he is accustomed to women doing that job, however he is still capable of seeing Ifeoma's help and appreciated it:

"But you are a woman. You do not count."

"Eh? So I don't count? Has Eugene ever asked you about your aching leg? If I do not count, then I will stop asking if you rose well in the morning."

Papa-Nnukwu chuckled. “Then my spirit will haunt you when I joined the ancestors.”

“It will haunt Eugene first.”

“I joke with you, *nwa m*. Where would I be today if my *chi* had not given me a daughter?” Papa- Nnukwu paused. “My spirit will intercede for you, so that *Chukwu* will send a good man to take care of you and the children.”

“Let your spirit ask *Chukwu* to hasten my promotion to senior lecturer, that is all I ask,” Aunty Ifeoma said (83).

In this conversation, Papa-Nnukwu not only jokes about women’s relative importance, but he perpetuates the idea that a woman always needs a man and is nothing without a male in her life. Even though Ifeoma is completely independent and lives on her own, he still wants a man to take care of her. Living as a widow may give Ifeoma more freedom, but it also comes with great disadvantages that she has to overcome alone. Widows in Nigeria do not have it easy. By living this inequality, many women are stigmatized after their husband’s death, even by their late husband’s family. For example, Folasade Johnson, who lost her husband in a car accident in which they were both involved, denounces how she felt when her late husband’s family would not let her take almost any possessions or the memories they shared: “they followed me everywhere to supervise the things I took. I noticed some things were missing ... his guitar and keyboard. I wanted to pick some music CDs.” When she asked about it she was told, ‘No you can’t pick this, that belongs to bros’ (late husband’s family). Johnson further complains that she “could not take even the things that she bought with her own money” (“Life as a Widow”). This story is about one out of many women who are left alone after their husbands’ death with children to take care of, but with little to no

help. Some of them, like Ifeoma, may have a full-time job that could help them economically; however, many others are not that lucky.

Even with all the preoccupations she may have to face with her old father, job and family, Ifeoma is still one of the brightest characters in the story. She teaches Kambili, without even knowing it, the real meaning of a family. Until that moment neither Kambili nor Jaja had felt secure in their own home surrounded by their own family. Ifeoma gives them the peace they could not find before. When Kambili describes her time at Ifeoma's house she describes everything as very joyful as well as calming. Even given that Ifeoma's house is quite small for all of them, they have to share rooms, sometimes there is no running water or electricity and they have to help with every house chore, Kambili feels more comfortable at Auntie Ifeoma's small place than at her own house:

I did not heat the water, either, because I was afraid that the heating coil would make the rainwater lose the scent of the sky. I sang as I bathed. There were more earthworms in the bathtub, and I left them alone, watching the water carry them and send them down the drain (270).

Ifeoma takes a fundamental part in freeing the two siblings from the mental and physical prison they have been living in. She gives them an opportunity to know themselves by sharing their own culture and traditions. Jaja and Kambili are able to get to know a little bit about their Papa-Nnukwu thanks to Ifeoma. As a result, Kambili is finally able to see and understand her grandfather and not be afraid to be in the same room with him (153). She learns that religions are not exclusive and, more importantly, that they are not a way of punishment. She longs for a relationship with her Papa-Nnukwu like her cousins have and even though she still struggles with the contradictory thoughts her father has instilled in her mind, she is curious and she needs to get to know him better: "Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu

spoke sometimes, their voices low, twinning together. They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have” (165).

Most importantly, at Ifeoma’s house, they both understand that neither religion or education are things to be afraid of. Their cousins and aunt embrace religion by mixing their culture with it: Ifeoma and her children sing Igbo songs loudly during the rosary (125), and they go to traditional festivals and participate in them as part of their roots (85). For Ifeoma, this is a source of empowerment; to embrace her origins and heritage is a way to embrace herself. She is able to teach Kambili and Jaja the importance of family, of being able to argue but still respect and care for each other.

3.3 Education and rebellion

According to the Statista Research Department and a survey made in Nigeria in 2020, the most common job for women in Nigeria, with a percentage of 29,9%, is being a housewife, followed by trader vendor and then agriculture. Only 4.8% women work as nurses, teachers or government officers and even fewer, 1.3% are doctors, lawyers, engineers or professors. Thus, few women in Nigeria have had the opportunity to access the labor market and, once there, as it has just been pointed out, the conditions are not equal. Ifeoma teaches at Nsukka University, a public institution, and it is there where she and her children endure the problems of a weak and corrupted educational system. As Dr. Omowumi Olabode Steven Ekundayo states “Funding is the biggest problem confronting Nigeria’s educational system. The percentage of the budget allocated to education annually is abysmally low. Only 7.04% was allocated to education, this is far below the UNESCO’s recommended 15% to 26%.”, which makes it difficult for organizations to grow or improve their conditions. This scarce investment also has to do with the privatization of public institutions, often preventing

students with no economic resources from continuing their studies and having to pursue them in bad and difficult conditions.

Ifeoma and, especially, her elder children, Amaka and Obiora, are very much aware of this problem and openly discuss it with Kambili and Jaja, who are ignorant of it so far. At Nsukka University, where Ifeoma lives, a tense environment can be felt. From the moment Ifeoma takes the kids on a ride around the campus, the reader begins to notice the problems that still have to be solved concerning the dilapidated state of the university buildings as stated by Kambili: “The building was old; I could tell from the color and from the windows, coated with the dust of so many harmattans that they would never shine again” (129).

The building Kambili is describing here is where Ifeoma teaches and has her office. The conclusion Kambili derives from that short trip is the existing difference between buildings: while some are beautiful, with open spaces, others are so small and neglected that they feel uncomfortable:

We were in a residential area, driving past bungalows in wide compounds with rose bushes and faded lawns and fruit trees. The street gradually lost its tarred smoothness and its cultivated hedges, and the houses became low and narrow, their front doors so close together that you could stand at one, stretch out, and touch the next door. There was no pretense at hedges here, no pretense at separation or privacy, just low buildings side by side amid a scattering of stunted shrubs and cashew trees. These were the junior-staff quarters, where the secretaries and drivers lived (131).

The infrastructure is not the only problem, but also the living conditions. As Ifeoma and the children explain to Kambili and Jaja, riots are a common thing at the university. Reacting to the corruption and unfairness in education, these riots are so brutal that they

completely divide the community and outrage the senior positions, which makes the situation incredibly difficult to manage:

She then pointed to the vice chancellor's lodge, to the high walls surrounding it, and said it used to have well-tended hedges of cherry and ixora until rioting students jumped over the hedges and burned a car in the compound (131).

This atmosphere opens up a debate at Ifeoma's household. When the circumstances are extremely tense and unstable, Ifeoma thinks about leaving for the United States, backed by her son Obiora who thinks there they would have better conditions and much more peace. This starts a disagreement within the family, a debate that Kambili witnesses, amazed because at her house no such thing was possible, since all she, Jaja and their mother ever said, was meant to please her father. Now she watches her cousins argue with each other and with their mother without fear of getting punished. She observes them having personal opinions and differing from Ifeoma without fear but respectfully.

Amaka is probably the most rebellious among the three, as she follows her mother's footsteps; she is a courageous girl that is really aware of what she wants. Like her mother, she will not look down over injustices and fighting, as she is hurt by the way things work in Nigeria. She is an idealist and has the potential and young optimism to think she can fix society's problems. She even shares with Ifeoma the desire to stay in Nsukka; however, when Ifeoma cannot take it anymore, she has no other option but to go, something that Amaka cannot accept.

“They are telling Mom to shut up” Amaka said. “Shut up if you do not want to lose your job because you can be fired *fiam*, just like that.” ...

“They should fire her, eh, so we can go to America,” Obiora said.

...

“Aunty Phillipa is asking Mom to come over. At last people there get paid when they are supposed to,” Amaka said, bitterly, as though she were accusing someone of something.

“And Mom will have her work recognized in America, without any nonsense politics”

...

“Did mom tell you she is going anywhere, *gbo*?” (224).

Amaka turns out to be the essence of Ifeoma and the hope of new generations to stand up like her mother has done. She is a crucial character for the development of Kambili. When the two girls first met they did not seem to get on well because Amaka thought Kambili could not have any problem, living in the mansion she was living in while attending a very prestigious school. She considered her cousin a snob (120), some fancy girl that was disgusted to share a room with anyone. However, this idea she has of Kambili eventually disappears and she is finally able to see her cousin without stereotypes. More importantly, she also gives Kambili a new way of seeing the world. She turns out to be the first friend Kambili has had and with her extroverted personality, which Kambili admires, she awakens her cousin’s teenage spirit. She is as fundamental to Kambili as Ifeoma is, which is why, at the end of the debate, Kambili could no longer imagine life without either Aunty Ifeoma’s family or Nsukka (224).

According to a study made by AbdullahiMohd Umar, Nigerian universities suffer a great loss of students, as well as professors, due to their fluent migrations to other universities outside the country. This is the consequence of poor infrastructures and an unstable political

and socio-economic atmosphere that do not allow for many institutions to develop correctly and grow (99-103). The high demand for college education in Nigeria, added to the poor and corrupted system that is supporting this education, makes many people abandon their home and move somewhere else in search of validation. Ifeoma and her children have to leave her country and home because they do not feel safe there, nor validated. Society, once again, disappoints Ifeoma and she, once again, has to discover new ways of surviving because that is the life for women in patriarchal and unscrupulous societies and, in Adichie's novel, Ifeoma cannot possibly continue fighting against a corrupt system that turns out to be too big for her. However, before leaving, she has shown Kambili the true meanings of family, of love and freedom. Thus, it would be a mistake to judge Ifeoma's departure as a fail as she has changed and empowered the mind of a girl that will always be grateful to her; and that is how change begins:

Nsukka started it all; Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at the Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do (16).

4. Conclusions

The different status men and women hold in Nigerian society and how this fact affects them have been analyzed and, even though a change is happening, patriarchal society still encroaches on the life of millions of women to this day. Eugene and Ifeoma are perfect representations of these two different approaches to modern life. Eugene represents the brutal part of humanity, the lack of understanding and the violent acts humans are capable of doing, while Ifeoma represents completely the opposite, the kindness and selfless actions humans are also in position to do. Adichie creates these two characters so different but at the same time so connected that it is hard to believe they were once raised together. This essay has tended to give voice to the situation that many women suffer on a daily basis as well as the pressure and stigmatization they have to carry and endure in their everyday lives. In this reading of Adichie's novel there has been a pause to illustrate the various ways different contemporary women face their everyday lives, hopes and frustrations. Among the life experiences analyzed here, it is crucial to understand that most of them agree with and highlight the difficult social, educational, religious and patriarchal contexts that still exist in today's Nigeria.

Furthermore, *Purple Hibiscus* offers a raw and realistic version of the brutal physical, mental and psychological abuse exerted by someone who is supposed to be a protector, Eugene, the strict father figure whose children fear and the brutally violent husband whose wife's whole life depends on. However, his sister Ifeoma, offers hope and strength to learn that there are other life options. Overall, she does try to convince Kambili and Jaja to live one's life as she has set the example for them. Finally, Kambili is able to see it and experience it. She is on the right path to the true freedom she has always wanted without even knowing it. It is at the end of Adichie's novel when she truly is invested in herself and has finally been

able to discover what she really wants. The metaphorical flame that Ifeoma has lighted within her has not been put down.

Men and the power they hold because of their gender is contrasted with the struggles women must endure in order to be validated. These include, Ifeoma more than any other female characters; Beatrice as a victim of domestic violence; and Amaka, who is representative of the younger generations and their faith in the possibility of change. In her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie confronts two different family worlds. In her story, the author is able to transport the reader through the fears and anxiety experienced by Kambili, but also by millions of girls who are in search of their true selves.

As a reader, *Purple Hibiscus*, raises awareness about a part of the world that has been completely forgotten by canonized writers and historians, as Adichie openly denounces in her TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story”. She indeed feels sorry for the million stories many girls might have been missing in their respective childhood and teen years. Given the scarcity of multifarious sides of Nigerian life at the same time she peppers her text with Nigerian custom and traditions, places, festivals and foods familiar to many girls reading her books. In doing so, Adichi enhances not only our minds but our souls, too.

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Annex



Figure 1: Adichie in her Ted Talk “The Danger of a Single Story” in 2009.



Figure 2: Political map of Nigeria.

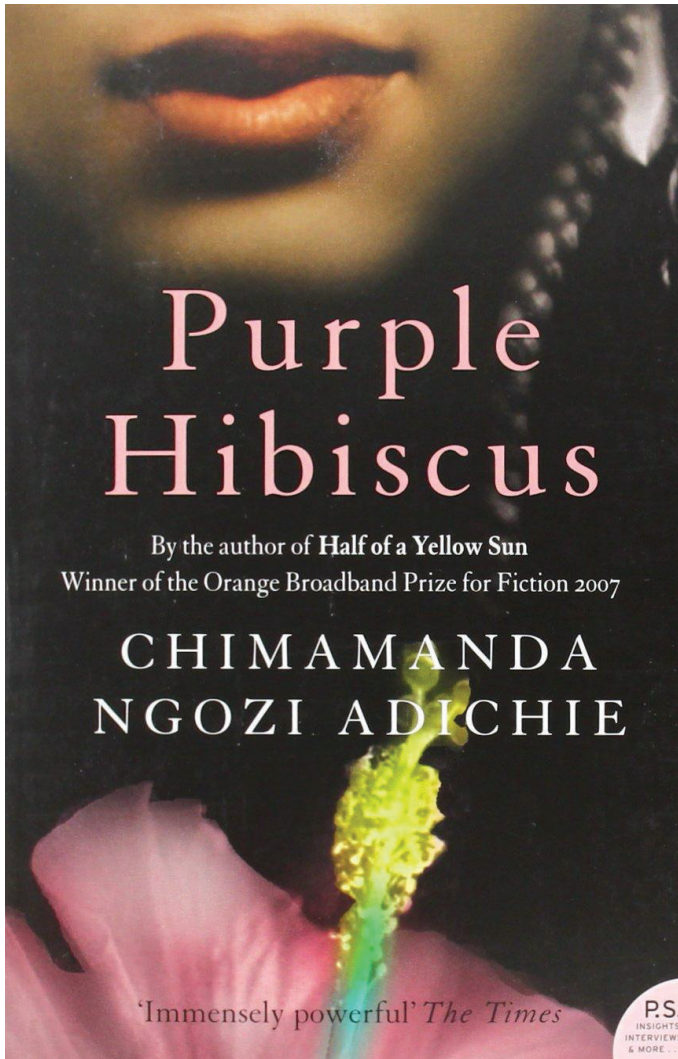


Figure 3: The cover of *Purple Hibiscus*.



Figure 4: Igbo festival called *Mmuo*.

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Figure 5: Adichie in the cover of *New African Women*.