



## Embodied Trauma and the Politics of Resistance in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.2.89](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.2.89)



### Article info

Article Received: 16/03/2026  
Article Accepted: 20/04/2026  
Published online: 29/04/2026

### Abstract

Trauma has emerged as one of the most prominent areas of inquiry in literary studies. Traumatic experiences produce profound disruptions in memory and identity, eventually leading to lasting psychological and emotional consequences. Trauma is often caused by human injustice, oppression and exploitation. The novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents trauma through the lives of characters, setting and narrative structure. This paper attempts to explore Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a narrative that reveals the agonies and traumatic experiences of a woman and her children, as well as an elderly father who is abandoned by his own son in old age, when he needed extra care. The paper utilizes feminist and psychoanalytic theory in the depiction of parent-child relationship, which is projected in the novel. This novel presents trauma arising from domestic violence inflicted on its characters. This paper has tried to explain how violence plays a very significant role in shaping of personality of people who have gone through bitter experiences in their lives. It demonstrates how trauma fiction serves as a valuable function. It is an important way of functioning and witnessing experience of the people. It also emphasizes the change noted in society's attitude towards the oppression of women, children and old people as well as the inhuman activity against soldiers who sacrifice their lives for the sake of their country and people.

Keywords: Trauma, Parent-Child Relationship, Patriarchal Violence, Religion, Human Vulnerability, Oppression

Postcolonial trauma theory merges postcolonial studies and trauma theory to explore the impact of colonialism on

postcolonial society in the contemporary world. An example of a unified theory for the postcolonial trauma context is insidious trauma

theory, proposed by feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown, which claims that there is also trauma from oppression that does not necessarily impact the body; instead, it does violence to the soul and spirit. To a large extent, the traumatic experiences faced by Nigerians can be credited to the colonization of Nigeria by the British. In 1914, the British created the political entity presently known as Nigeria after occupying the region in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For decades, the British used their power by enforcing Western practices on the Nigerian people, which resulted in drastic political, economic, and cultural change within the country. The turmoil of postcolonial Nigerian society is represented with all its intricacies by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her literary works. The exposure to colonialism led to the development of new social hegemonies in Nigeria, which gave way to a new power structure in society. Precolonial social hegemonies were challenged by the colonizers, who took over the power structure and redefined it as per their convenience. Trauma is generally defined by events that present extraordinary challenges to cope with and adapt to. The psychological impact of trauma remains even after physical injury or injuries have healed with the passage of time. Literary works represent both the dark and bright sides of the world and life. Therefore, literary works reflect a particular period and the related situation of life at that specific time. Trauma narratives basically deal with many important social and psychological issues, often being concerned with manmade traumatic situations.

*Purple Hibiscus* is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut novel, published in 2003. Her literary work deals with social and psychological issues. Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* is set in the late twentieth century in South East Nigeria and narrated in the context of civil unrest, corruption, and military coups. The story of *Purple Hibiscus* revolves around an Igbo family in Enugu, a city in postcolonial

Nigeria, during the political turmoil of the late twentieth century. The trauma that the characters experience in the novel occurs within the domestic sphere. This novel is woven into a complex web of relationships. It focuses on the prosperous Achike family. Eugene's relationship with his family members is very distressing, as the protagonist, a fifteen-year-old Kambili, suffers paternal oppression alongside her mother, Beatrice, and her brother, Jaja. The word *trauma* is especially related to the wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind (Caruth 3).

Eugene's unquestionable belief in Christianity plays a very significant role in shaping his actions, especially towards his family members. However, his rigid piety serves as an important tool to control his family, leading to hypocrisy and a distorted sense of morality. Eugene's rejection of his father because of Papa-Nnukwu's adherence to traditional Igbo beliefs creates a rift between father and son, and this rift is never healed until the last moment of his father's life. Even at the final stage of life, Eugene did not allow his father to live with him because of their religious differences—a time when his father needed extra care in his old age. Even after the death of his father, Nnukwu, Eugene does not have a good opinion of his father because of their different religious beliefs. Eugene does not allow his children to have any contact with their grandfather, except for a single chance given to Kambili and Jaja to meet him for a very short period. Eugene seems to resonate with Western values, and his unquestionable belief in Christianity is presented as the only true one. His inclination to negate all that is pagan and native definitely identifies him as too much of a colonial product. As Kambili mentions: "We had to sound civilized in public, he told us we had to speak English. Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product" (Adichie 13).

In the novel, Adichie explores the consequences of physical violence in Kambili

Achike, a Nigerian teenager with an authoritative father, a passive mother, and an older brother who is also helpless before his father. Eugene uses violent punishment on his family members and at the same time justifies this brutality as a tool for his family to remain pure in God's eyes. Eugene's fixation with perfectionism, order, and control hampers his relationship with his family members. Eugene's use of physical violence generates permanent traumatic effects of fear and unwanted submission to authority in the minds of his wife and children. His brutality towards his own wife is depicted in the following lines: "The small table that was used to keep the family Bible, Eugene broke it on his spouse's belly, and the doctor said that there was nothing he could do to save the unborn baby. Beatrice tells this painful humiliation to Eugene's sister Ifeoma, and she cried for a long time, she cried until she fell asleep" (Adichie 180).

His brutality towards his own children reveals an absence of compassion and a lack of bond between father and children. On one occasion, when Kambili breaks her Eucharistic fast because her mother and brother tell her to eat breakfast in order to take medicine to relieve pain, all are beaten by Eugene as he considers it a sinful act. The Eucharistic fast mandated that the faithful are not supposed to eat solid food one hour before Mass. They never break the Eucharistic fast: "Eat a little corn flakes, quickly," Mama said, almost in a whisper. "You need something in your stomach to hold the Panadol" (Adichie 101). Kambili takes corn flakes in the absence of her father. Suddenly, her father arrives and stares at the glass bowl of corn flakes in Kambili's hand. "What are you doing, Kambili? I swallowed hard. I...I... you are eating ten minutes before Mass?" He turned to Mama, "You sit there and watch her desecrate the Eucharistic fast." Eugene reacted with anger and violence. He unbuckled his belt slowly. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm. I put the bowl down just as the belt

landed on my back, as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win (Adichie 101-102). A feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic—a situation where a person is unable to take any action that can affect the outcome of the event (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 89). A silence born of pain and grief insinuates itself. Beatrice attempts to break the silence of physical and psychological torture by slowly poisoning Eugene, proving that she can no longer tolerate such brutal treatment from her husband. This also raises many questions regarding the validity of the decision to take her husband's life by poison, and at the same time regarding her son taking the blame upon himself. The tragic condition of Jaja is visible. First, he is physically and psychologically tortured by his own father, and then ultimately ends up imprisoned for a crime of which he is not aware, but he takes the blame upon himself to save his mother. Both children are expected to develop according to a fixed pattern assigned by Eugene Achike; he gives Jaja and Kambili schedules for their time in Nsukka.

Aunty Ifeoma's house proves to be a safe haven for Kambili and Jaja. The psychological and physical trauma is relieved for a short time through a visit to their aunt Ifeoma's house. In this house, noisy and full of laughter, they discover life and love and, at the same time, a terrible bruising secret within the family. In Ifeoma's home, both children realize the true nature of Papa's oppression and start to assert their own identities. Kambili and her brother's visit to Aunty Ifeoma opens the door to another aspect of life. Though this family lacks material wealth, they dwell in happiness as they are not bound by strict rules and regulations. They all seemed to simply speak and speak and speak; Kambili wondered how Amaka opened her mouth and had words flow easily out (Adichie 99). As she spends time with her cousins, her grandfather, and a sympathetic young Nigerian priest, Kambili finds herself in an entirely

different world that is devoid of hostility, violence, and tyranny—a freedom that she had not experienced before coming to Auntie Ifeoma's house. Auntie Ifeoma is a self-sufficient single mother. In contrast to Eugene's suppression of his children's voices, Ifeoma encourages her children to laugh and to speak their minds. The days spent at Ifeoma's house create an awareness within Kambili of the oppressive characteristics of Eugene's patriarchal rule. It has been portrayed that they are the victims of a toxic developmental pattern. The unfortunate consequence of this toxicity is that their attitude towards life is also mistaken.

Eugene is a political rights activist. For a while, his behavior at home is contrary to his public figure and his public acts of generosity, for which he wins a human rights award from Amnesty World. But his relationship with his own family members is very harsh and brutal; even his relation with his father is not cordial. Adichie exemplifies religious hypocrisy in the Christian life of Eugene:

"Eugene pays the school fees of up to a hundred of our people. Do you know how many people are alive because of your brother? ... Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? ... You have come again with your university talk, Ifeoma," she said mildly, and then looked away to signal that the conversation was over. I had never seen Mama like that, never seen that look in her eyes, and never heard her say so much in such a short time (Adichie 250-51).

From the above discussion, it has been depicted that "one can influence another individual best when someone is in the mood in which he or she feels that his or her own rights are guaranteed" (Adler 49). Here it has been portrayed that Beatrice is helpless: she cannot leave her husband, nor is she in a state to live with him because of his brutal treatment of her and her children. Trauma creates a separation

from self. Unable to cope with the imposed violence, his wife Beatrice starts poisoning his tea, and their son Jaja takes the blame for the murder upon himself. The continuous violence inflicted on her psyche produces traumatic effects so long-lasting that even after Eugene's death she cannot cope with life. Trauma narratives engage readers in a number of important social and psychological issues. In the novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), it is observed that the representation of trauma is channeled through the characters of Kambili (daughter), Jaja (son), and Beatrice Achike (wife). Beatrice never speaks a single word against her husband; both the children and wife live under the constant fear of Eugene Achike. Eugene Achike demands perfection from Jaja and Kambili in every aspect of life; they have to live according to Eugene Achike, and he does not allow his children to have their own choice and voice. Both children are used to receiving severe punishment for every small mistake. Getting first position in their class is essential for both Jaja and Kambili in order to escape harsh and brutal punishment. "Experiences teach us that it makes very little difference whether one is first or not. Experience demonstrates that happiness does not consist of being the first or best. To teach a child such a principle makes them one-sided. Above all, it robs them of their chance of being a good human being" (Adler 109).

In spite of the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can transform people's psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experience (Van der Kolk and McFarlane 4). This is true in the case of Beatrice. After the death of Eugene Achike, she is unable to cope properly with the situation. She confesses that she has poisoned her husband; she even writes letters to newspapers, but nobody believes her. In this way, it has been shown that traumatic experiences let the past remain unresolved and lingering because it is not processed in the way normal information is.

"Get up! Get away from that painting! ... Get up!" Papa said again. I still did not move. He started to kick me. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hell fire. The kicking increased in tempo. I curled around the peace of the painting. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. When I opened my eyes... thank God! Mama stood up and pressed her hand to my forehead. "Thank God you are awake." Her face felt clammy with tears. Her touch was light, yet it sent needles of pain all over me. "It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before," Mama said (Adichie 210-214).

When Eugene Achike comes to know that both children, Kambili and Jaja, have spent time with their grandfather at Auntie Ifeoma's house, he is displeased and punishes them. Kambili is severely punished by her father because she brought a painting of her grandfather into the house. Hot water is poured on Kambili's feet. She does not want to leave the hospital and go home. She takes her exams in her hospital bed.

Difficulties arise when the natural tenderness of parents toward their children is not manifested in a proper way. This leads to serious developmental issues in young children. Neglect, in any relationship, does a lot of harm, as has been shown in the case of Eugene Achike's family members. Childhood experiences shape the entire life of an individual, and at the same time, the behavior of parents toward their children during this critical period of early childhood may affect and lead to unfortunate consequences, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has presented in the case of Kambili and Jaja. The pain that took root in their early years is hardly removed, and the coldness they have experienced prevents them from approaching life in a better way, as has been shown especially in the case of Jaja.

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* can also be examined from a *Bildungsroman* perspective. The moment of self-realization and freedom in

the lives of Kambili and Jaja occurs at Auntie Ifeoma's house in Nsukka; their contact with their cousins gives them a different view of the world. Jaja learns to take responsibility from his cousin Obiora – the responsibility to protect his mother and sister. He takes responsibility for his mother's actions and goes to prison, showing maturity and sacrifice. Kambili learns independence at Auntie Ifeoma's house. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been able to expose the political, social, religious, and economic evils in Nigerian society with the hope of suggesting solutions to these social issues. Adichie exposes evils with the aim of correcting and eradicating them from society. Trauma in the novel is not merely an experience of suffering but a catalyst for transformation. The oppressive silence imposed by the patriarch gives way to acts of resistance, embodied in Kambili's assertive voice and Jaja's defiance. This rebellion does not erase the scars of the past, but it paves the way for healing and selfhood, signaling that trauma is not an end but the beginning of liberation.

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