

RESEARCH ARTICLE

JOURNEY FROM RESISTANCE TO FREEDOM IN NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

SAREENA SUBBA

Research Scholar, Department of English, Pondicherry University, India



SAREENA SUBBA

Article Info:

Article Received:18/08/2014

Revised on: 27/08/2014

Accepted on: 28/08/2014

ABSTRACT

This study examined the relentless struggle of marginalized individuals, particularly, women, against various powerful authorities through resistance of different forms. It further studied their aspirations for freedom and failures they encountered eventually. **Purple Hibiscus** reveals the continuous struggle of individuals who are trapped within some form of domination that exploits them and hence, curbs their freedom. These people are always subjected to violence, subjugation and discrimination. An impassioned desire for liberation is what motivates their struggle against the mammoth forces of power. The study, further, explored the latent source of resistance among women who were pushed to margins both in familial and outside world. Subjugation, resistance and freedom are dominant themes of the text. However, the idea that all struggles do not lead to freedom underlines the core of the novel. Most of the characters in the text end up in failure and disillusionment despite their long struggle against the adverse forces that have controlled and dominated their life.

Key Words: Resistance, Freedom, Struggle, Patriarchy, Violence, Oppression

© Copyright KY Publications

INTRODUCTION

Every individual born in this world has a right to freedom. However, freedom seldom comes without the journey of struggle. Resistance is one of the best tools of struggle for freedom from oppression. *Purple Hibiscus* captures the impact of patriarchy, domestic violence, religious fanaticism, and autocratic rule on a group of individuals, particularly, women who are constantly marginalized, brutalized and victimized in Postcolonial Nigerian society. The novel is a tender first-person narrative of a young girl, Kambili, who explores and exposes oppression and violence prevalent on different levels of Nigerian society. She narrates her journey of transformation from a silent victim to a strong voice of resistance. Her narration is built around the lives of her oppressed mother, Beatrice, her silent brother, Jaja and herself. These characters, along with Papa-

Nnukwu, Auntie Ifeoma and her children, are in a state of relentless struggle against the domination of different kinds. Efforts of resistance and desire for freedom are conspicuous in the way all the victimized characters gradually stand up against violence and oppression. Moreover, *Purple Hibiscus* tells us the story of Eugene Achike, who is a wealthy businessman and influential person within his community. He is a major tool of oppression who is depicted as a religious fanatic. Apart from that, he is an inconsiderate patriarch who resorts to violence, even at the slightest provocation from his wife and children. Eugene does not spare even his sick and elderly father, whom he denounces as a 'Godless' man. It is shocking to know when he punishes his own children for sharing room with their grandfather, Papa- Nnukwu. Furthermore, *Purple Hibiscus* explores the exploitation of women in both familial and socio-political domain. All

women characters go through an endless suffering perpetrated by either male oppression or State tyranny. However, Adichie does not portray only women as victims in the novel. Male characters like Jaja, Papa- Nnukwu and Ade Coker are also depicted as characters who persistently struggle against the oppression of different forms. Violence, suppression and intimidation are common activities that fill the narration in *Purple Hibiscus*. In fact, the novel opens with the line suggesting an act of violence from Papa (Eugene):

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère.

The opening line of the novel not only suggests an act of violence, but there is an underlying hint of resistance for prospective change. Jaja's first act of defiance can be read as a beginning of the downfall of Eugene's authority based on chauvinism. Interestingly, the first instance of resistance comes from Jaja instead of his sister, Kambili. She prefers to follow her brother rather than leading him. Although, Kambili questions her father's authority towards the end, she, initially, unintentionally encourages her father's patriarchal excesses on his family by choosing to remain silent. In fact, she often seeks attention from her Papa and always looks for an opportunity to please him. Their mother, Beatrice, is a quiet and a docile woman who probably is the worst victim of patriarchy executed by her husband. She is lashed and battered along with her children whenever Eugene feels they have deviated from the ideals he has set for them. She is merely a silent spectator of her husband's constant exploitation and violence. However, she is forced to take up an extreme form of resistance by ending her husband's life eventually when his demonic oppression crosses its limit. This significant step taken by Beatrice is a deliberate attempt, on the author's part, to assert an alternative voice of a woman who has ability to redeem her freedom. Although Beatrice is depicted as a helpless mother who remains passive most of the time, she delivers courage when it requires the most.

According to Helen Chukwuma, female assertion has been a continued trend in African Feminist literature. Thus, self-assertion of Beatrice, through the climactic act of eliminating her oppressor, can be seen as a deliberate attempt by the author to continue the trend of female assertion. Chukwuma further comments that female assertion can be seen as an attempt to correct the traditional image of women as "indeterminate human beings who are heavily dependent, gullible, voiceless and stuck in the background of the patrimony which marked most African societies" (Chukwuma:131). Adichie reaffirms the voice of women who are capable of overthrowing patriarchal authority if they are continuously denied their basic rights and opportunity. However, *Purple Hibiscus* is more about women's struggle for attaining freedom than the experience of real freedom.

II. Silence and Resistance

Purple Hibiscus depicts the contrasting ideas of silence and resistance overlapping and intertwined in the lives of Kambili, Jaja and their mother, Beatrice. Though they begin their journey as voiceless individuals, but all of them, gradually, find their voice through resistance in their own different ways.

The issue of Patriarchal oppression is highlighted through the character of Eugene, who subjugates his own family members through constant violence and intimidation. However, a major part of the narration recounts the phase of silence. The victimized characters such as Kambili, Beatrice and Jaja are silent spectators of their own exploitation. Moreover, their domestic world is filled with deep silence literally as well as metaphorically. Kambili describes the abundant silence that runs in every part of their family life:

Our steps on the stairs were as measured and silent as our Sundays: the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch...the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterward. Even our family time on Sundays was quiet... (31)

This surficial silence actually suggests an inner helplessness of Beatrice and her children. Beatrice is depicted as a submissive wife who

silently suffers her husband's constant atrocity without any resistance. However, Beatrice can be seen as a victim of a larger patriarchal society rather than merely a victim of a chauvinist husband. Kolawole in *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997) rightly observes that African women are the products of multiple subjugation, such as "Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism, all combine to act against the African woman's self-assertion" (25). Eugene is a quintessential byproduct of colonial influence and ideas that shaped him to be a fanatic catholic who exploits and brutalizes his own family. Colonial endorsement of patriarchal ideas is more illustrative in the words of Amaka Azuike who says that "Western colonization, unfortunately, had very little or no respect for women. For years, women's history became that of docility and sheer domesticity... The boys on the other hand, were taught how to read and write." (2009: pp-81)

Beatrice represents the deplorable condition of African women who lack economic independence. Thus, their life is exclusively controlled by men. It is well manifested by a scene where Beatrice is quite unwell and wants to take a rest in the car. Her husband's response to her is extremely shocking:

"Let me stay in the car and wait, biko", Mama (Beatrice) said, leaning against the Mercedes. "I feel vomit in my throat". Papa turned to stare at her... "Are you sure you want to stay in the car?" Papa asked. Mama was looking down; her hands were placed on her belly, to hold the wrapper from untying itself or to keep her bread and tea breakfast down. "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)

It is ironic that despite the constant brutality of her husband, Beatrice validates his action as something normal and hence, acceptable. She fails to recognize the power of the resistance. In fact, she feels a sense of gratitude towards her husband for not bringing a new wife even after several miscarriages:

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

However, Adichie attempts to push Beatrice from the margin to the centre by entrusting her with the final act of self-assertion. She kills her husband by poisoning his tea. Eugene's unending, but impenitent violence leaves her with no choice but to take such an extreme decision. One feels immensely outraged and appalled when Beatrice describes an episode of her husband's brutality:

"You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly"... "My blood finished on that floor..." (248)

Although, the act of killing cannot be appreciated or justified, however, it can be interpreted as – an only alternative to atrocity, an extreme form of resistance, an act of strong defiance or a voice of self-assertion. Nevertheless, her defining act opens the door to freedom from patriarchal domination.

However, Kambili goes through a transformation from a silent worshipper of her father to someone who defies his authority after she visits Nsukka. She admits that "Nsukka began to lift the silence" from their life. Her exposure to freedom in her aunt's home in Nsukka and her affection for Father Amadi entirely changed her perception of her Papa and the superficial domestic world he had built for his children. In Nsukka, Kambili finds her voice, her laughter and her ability to question her Papa's patriarchal principles. Her aunt's liberal domestic environment develops a desire for freedom in Kambili. Besides, Nsukka is the place where she reconnects herself with her traditional root through her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. Initially, his sincere way of living or his purity of heart baffles Kambili as she believed him to be a 'Godless' man as always portrayed by her Papa, Eugene. Subsequently, Papa-Nnukwu becomes the biggest source of strength for Kambili. This is finely illustrated by the scene where her cousin, Amaka gifts a painting of Papa-Nnukwu to Kambili. The painting of Papa Nnukwu symbolizes

Kambili's reconnection with her traditional root as well as her newly found strength of resistance.

However, Kambili pays a high cost for her first act of defiance. She almost loses her life when Eugene comes to know about the painting of Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili demonstrates the first instance of concrete resistance when she holds on to the broken pieces of her grandfather's painting, despite an inevitable threat of physical assault from her Papa. Kambili recounts:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes... kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy... I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (210-211)

It is interesting to notice that Kambili's brother, Jaja, also goes through a similar transformation from a silent young boy to someone who rebels against his Papa's age-old authority after his visit to Nsukka. Moreover, it is Nsukka that opens the door to prospective freedom as Lily Mabura observes – "As with Kambili, Nsukka enables Jaja to break the blanket of silence, embrace defiance, and initiate a cultural reclamation of his Igbo roots." (2008: pp-220). Adichie has appropriately used a flower image to illustrate Jaja's aspiration for freedom:

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom... A freedom to be, to do. (16)

III. Failures and Freedom

Perpetual quest for freedom is a common element among all the marginalized characters in **Purple Hibiscus**. Adichie strongly addresses the problems of patriarchy at the domestic level and the problem of totalitarian excesses at the national level. If Kambili and Beatrice confront patriarchy within the familial domain, Ifeoma confronts it in her professional space.

Apparently, Eugene's death and Ifeoma's emigration to America suggests an optimistic picture for a while. However, the prospect of freedom slowly recedes into the oblivion. It is evident in the way Beatrice suffers a loss of mental

stability; Kambili secretly longs for a father-figure; Ifeoma gets disillusioned with her new life in America and constantly misses home.

Ironically, *Purple Hibiscus* concludes with an underlying note that women are subjected to an inevitable male domination in a cyclical way. It is conspicuous in the way Jaja emerges as a new male authority after his father's death. His act of self-sacrifice at a crisis moment can be seen as, yet again, a patriarchal idea of a man as an instant decision taker and protector of his family. On the other hand, Kambili simply follows his brother's footsteps, suggesting her inability to lead. Furthermore, the transfer of power from one male authority to another is appropriately highlighted by the scenes where Beatrice does not listen to her daughter when she is asked to tie her scarf, but she immediately ties her scarf when her son, Jaja tells her to do so:

"You did not tie your scarf well," Jaja says to Mama. I stare in amazement ... Mama hastily unties and reties her scarf – and this time, she knots it twice and tight at the back of her head. (306)

Journey from resistance to freedom, for these women, seem quite incomplete unless they have a full-fledged control over their own life.

WORKS CITED

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Harper Perennial, 2004. Print.
- Azuike, Maureen Amaka. "Women's Struggle and Independence in Adichie's 'Purple Hibiscus' and 'Half of a Yellow Sun.'" *An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal* (2009): 79-91. print.
- Chukwuma, Helen. "Voices and Choices: The Feminist Dilemma in Four African Novels." Emenyonu, Earnest N. (eds.). *Literature and Black Aesthetics*. Calabar: Heinemann, 1990. 131-142. Print.
- Kolawole, Mary Egun Modupe. *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton NJ: AWP, 1997. Print.
- Lily, G.N. Mabura. "Breaking Gods: An African Postcolonial Gothic Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Purple Hibiscus' and 'Half of a Yellow Sun'." *Research in African Literatures* (Spring, 2008): 203-222. Web.