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## FEMALE BILDUNGSROMAN IN ADICHIE'S “PURPLE HIBISCUS”

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### ABSTRACT

*Post colonial Literature is a body of literary writings that reacts to the conversation of colonization. Post colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of decolonization or the political and cultural independents of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, part of the third generation narration is concerned with the identity of the modern African woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Chimamanda Adichie is one of the prominent contemporary Nigerian women writers. She is dynamic and writes from a feminist perspective. Her novel usually deals with the social, cultural, traditional, economical and mental conflicts of women. Adichie presents real life situations in her novels. Adichie succeeds in creating characters that negotiate hybrid identities defining selfhood. She wants woman to realize herself through self analysis. Such a quest for one's own identity forms the theme of her novels. Purple hibiscus reflects the theme of identity. In the home culture each female is exposed to a fixed identity, but when she moves outside her home life. She is able to develop her own values from the world views of his parents. Purple hibiscus is a coming of age story for the central characters Kambili. The novel is narrated by Kambili about her struggle to attain her self- identity. This paper focuses on the search for self identity. The novel aims at discussing the divergent problems encountered by Nigerian women in the patriarchal society.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Bildungsroman” is a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity. In a Bildungsroman, the goal is maturity,

and the protagonist achieves it gradually with difficulty. The genre often features a main conflict between the main character and society. The term female Bildungsroman is to defend the representation of women's experience in writing a necessary means to fulfill the goal of finding a new female Bildung.

The central theme of contemporary women's fiction is the quest for authentic female self development. The starts from the adolescent protagonist's coming of age as the mature woman's awakening to reality of her social and cultural role as a women and her subsequent attempts to reexamine her life and shape it in accordance with her new feminist consciousness. The novel represents a classic Bildungsroman or growing up and search for self identity of the protagonist. *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is the first novel by the Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie. Adichie uses her own childhood experiences to inform the lives of her characters. *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age story for the central character Kambili. The novel is narrated by Kambili about her struggle to attain her self identity. The title focuses on the search for self identity by employing the genre Female Bildungsroman in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* reveals the realistic representation of sufferings and sorrows, pains and problems of the female protagonist Kambili and her mother Beatrice in the background of familial relationships. "*Purple Hibiscus* is to unearth the conformation of male domination in Nigerian society. She explores the shades of female marginalization stemming from patriarchy" (Oauyade 256). The children of *Purple Hibiscus*, **Jaja** and **Kambili Achike**, seek to carve out their own identities. This is also true of Nigeria, "a young country in several striking ways, and the most telling is the age of its people: well over half are less than thirty; an amazing forty-four percent are under fifteen years of age" (Hawley, 2009, p. 16). The youth of Nigeria are tasked with rebuilding the nation, depopulated after a destructive war. Similarly, as Kambili and Jaja's family disintegrates, they must come into their own, a task metaphorically equal to the struggle of Nigeria to form its own identity in its post-colonial society; according to Madelaine Hron (2009), "**the child's quest for a socio cultural identity is inextricably linked to issues arising from post colonialism and globalization**" (p. 27).

The many authority figures who provide models for the children represent the many facets of Nigeria's identities present, past, and possible futures. Kambili and Jaja are allegories for burgeoning post-colonial Nigeria, which must also face an adolescent-like emergence into an identity separate from its colonial roots. The fact that both children are ethnically Igbo, a culture and ethnicity ripped apart by violence, indicates that the identity of Nigeria rests in how well its people can overcome the pain of their past. Children and adolescents do not have the ability to fully integrate all of their personality characteristics and influences into a

cohesive whole; this is a skill inherent in the adult brain:

Cognitive-developmental advances promoting greater differentiation conspire with socialization pressures to develop different selves in different relational contexts. Cognitive advances also allow the adolescent to construct self-attributes that represent *abstractions* about the self, based upon the ability to integrate trait labels into higher-order generalizations. However, these abstract representations are highly compartmentalized or over differentiated, and therefore the adolescent can only think about each as isolated characteristics of the self." (Harter, 1999, p. 66)

In each of the authority figures, in each of the potential futures for Nigeria, Kambili and Jaja are faced with aspects of themselves that are fragmentary and in conflict with one another. Discovering their selfhoods will require navigation through all of the pieces of their identities, including familial, cultural, and political influences. Emerging Nigeria faces the same difficult task. Realizing a cohesive sense of self is by no means certain for the children or for Nigeria. Kambili and Jaja are bombarded by opposing forces: indigenous and colonial, Pagan and Christian, Nigerian and English, familial loyalty and individual identity.

They like "many groups effectively inhabit two worlds simultaneously, navigating between indigenous and dominant Western systems" (Meskell, 2005, p. 76). They also are trapped in that liminal space between child and adult, and their successful navigation of their models for adulthood—the authority figures will determine how well the children are able to grow into their futures and, by extension, how Nigeria will do the same.

In this novel, the creation of Kambili, Beatrice, aunty Ifeoma, opens the gate to appreciate the novelist's ideal of womanhood. The characters like Kambili and Beatrice are projected as the sufferers of patriarchal authority. The novel explores the growth process of the protagonist, Kambili. Throughout the novel, she is a mere observe Eugene, her father, rules their household with a heavy hand. But as the novel progresses, she tries to realize her own voice and role in her life.

Kambili is an intelligent and observant young girl but she is so shy and inhibited. Eugene is a religious fanatic and a violent figure at home. On the contrary, he is a revered member of Enugu, Nigeria. He is an influential and wealthy business man who owns several factories. Also, he runs a newspaper entitled the standard. Eugene is a product of colonialist education. He studied in a missionary school. So he tries to follow a western life style which is not suitable in countries like Nigeria. He is an authoritative and strict disciplinarian. His home is

modernized up to western standards. But there prevails a lot of emptiness in it. His big house which is enclosed with high walls topped by electrical cables permitting no outsiders is almost like a prison.

Kambili and her family suffer as the subject Eugene's authority. He crushes everyone under his feet kambili always lives in perpetual fear of him. Violence seems to have erupted in the very first line of novel. Kambili says that **"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"** (03). Whenever kambili and her mother make a mistake, he beats them brutally. He never hesitates to throw a table or a heavy missal over them. He always maintains a daily schedule for his children who include study hours, prayer, church masses, family time, siesta, lunch, sleep etc. kambili has no friends. She is not permitted to watch television, she is not able to answer. Amaka thinks that she is bored by her luxuries. Amaka has come from the poor family background and is raised by a single parent. But kambili knows very well that watching tv is not in her daily schedule. Thus each and every activity of her is clearly described and must be strictly adhered to.

Kambili is so reserved and reticent. Her classmates usually call her **"a backyard snob"**(52). She never takes part in sports activities. She spends most of her time in the library which means she always tries to be in isolation. When the school closing bell rings, she runs fast to get into her car without exchanging pleasantries with her classmates. They think that as kambili is the daughter of an influential rich business man, she is not so sociable. But kambili knows the reason very well that her life activities are regulated and dictated by her father. She does not dare to tell them the truth that she runs home as fast as possible because she is not allowed to be late. She does so in order to escape from the severe punishment given by her father. Whenever Eugene introduces a new product of cool drinks, jams, pickles etc. in his factory, he brings those to home and his family must assess those, whether they like it or not. It is an unwritten law in her house. Even when sometimes kambili feel like coughing or nauseating on tasting them, she has to give her compliment to her father.

The kind of educational system Eugene wants for kambili is dehumanizing. When kambili gets the second rank in her class her father asks her, "How many heads does she have?" "One" I did not need to look at her to know that, but I looked at her anyway. (46)

Here "she" refers to the girl who gets the first rank. Also, he brings a mirror and shows it to her to make it sure the number of heads she has. For fear of

being tortured, kambili employs a new method of studying. She says that, "I memorized what the teacher said because I knew my text books would not make sense if I tried to study later" (52). Whenever she writes examinations, she feels like a hard lump of "poorly made fufu" (52) rolling in her throat and tormenting her until she gets her examination papers. She feels a great relief when she gets the first rank. Eugene's religious intolerance is responsible for domestic violence and brutal assault in this novel. He is very particular about his daughter attending church masses, receiving communion, confessing guilt, reciting prayers during lunch and supper etc. If she fails to do any religious duty, she would be beaten severely. Kambili remembers very well that when her brother jaja forgot to attend two questions in his catechism test, Eugene broke his little finger. Even she confesses her guilt to father Benedict for having spent longer time with her grandfather Papa Nnukwu. Papa calls his father a "heathen" because he still follows the religious traditions of the Igbo people. Eugene considers him a heathen and never speaks to him. He also never allows his children to meet him. But every Christmas Eugene's family goes to Abba. At the time he allows kambili to spend time with her grandfather for fifteen minutes, but on condition that she should not drink even a drop of water at her grandfather house. It is an irony that Eugene is a big shot in his county whereas his father leads a hand-to-mouth life. Every Sunday kambili's family fasts before mass until they return home. Kambili still remembers an incident in which she suffered from cramps because of the period and her mother gave a bowl of con flakes to her. Having seen such a scene, he lashed them with his belt. But he always says tries to justify his action saying that walk into sin and that he tries to save them.

Eugene's patriarchal cruelty reaches its height when he burns the feet of kambili for having shared her room with Papa Nnukwu at Auntie Ifeoma's house. Also, he unleashes his anger on her for keeping the portrait of her grandfather given by her cousin without her father's consent. He becomes furious and beats her brutally. She says in her own words that **"he started to kick me-mental buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. A salty wetness warned my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped"** (210-11). Also, he treats his wife badly when she is unable to get out of the car to meet Father Benedict because of her pregnancy.

Fortunately there comes a change in the life of kambili when she gets an opportunity to meet her widowed auntie Ifeoma who works as a lecture at the University of Nsukka. Her visit at Nsukka makes a lot of difference from her home at Enugu. Auntie

Ifeoma is a great inspiration for her. Aunt, Eugene's younger sister, makes her enjoy a lot of freedom. At Nsukka her aunt does not allow kambili to follow her daily schedule drawn up by her father. Aunt severs as a symbol of rebellions modern Nigerian women. She challenge the way the federal government University administrators.. She is accused of being disloyal and is in the thread of losing her job. Aunt's children Amaka Obiora and Chima are given equal freedom to speak their mind, aspirations, joys, sorrows, etc. kambili witness that though amaka and her brothers are poor yet they love and encourage one other. But kambili is wealthy yet suffers.

The experience that kambili has at ifeoma's Nsukka leads her towards self realization. She understands clearly that how her aunt sets goals for her children and how she encourages them to jump higher. She realizes the fate that she excels only because she is terrified of being punished by her father if she fails. For kambili Nsukka does not represent a town where her aunt lives but a symbol of freedom, courage and power. At Nsukka only **"her mouth which is always closed seems to be performing almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes and sings"**. Her experience teaches her to be determined and stubborn. Even she is surprised to see her mother showing her defiance in the form of violating the so called rules of her household. Beatrice's defiance is the result of the reason that Eugene is too weak to challenge her for she has been poisoning him for several days.

Aunt too undergoes severe emotional and psychological torture when her relatives and neighbors blame her for the death of her husband. But she overcomes such accusations with the help of her determination and confidence. Aunt is the only woman who challenges Eugene's authority boldly. She cuts short mostly of Eugene's hard handedness. She never expects help from her brother. When her brother is ready to offer to pay for a catholic funeral for Papa Nnukwu, she refuses angrily. Because she believes that her father is not a heathen, but a traditionalist. When she is terminated from her job, she is placed in an embarrassing situation. She must consider other options to feed her children. She decides to go to America with her family despite the warning given by chiaku, her friend, that she would be treated as a second- class citizen there. Leaving her homeland is not her intention. But she feels that she has to do so for the survival of her family. Thus the visit helps kambili to lift silence from her world.

Beatrice, kambili's mother is another victim of patriarchal subordination. She is a symbol of oppressed Nigerian tradition woman. She is

uneducated and unsophisticated. She depends wholly on her husband for economic security. Thus she has neither economic independence nor intellectual awareness. She is a typically tradition Nigerian wife whose identity is confined to the pleasures of her husband and the management of her household. She has no voice at her home. She is subjected to physical and psychological assault perpetuated by her husband. But she suffer silently. When Ifeoma advises her to quit married life she replies that a man is necessary for a woman's life. Her husband's word is final. When Eugene unleashes his anger on kambili, Beatrice cries and tries to console her daughter. But she does not dare to stop her husband from his cruelty

Polygamy is quite acceptable in the Nigerian society. Women would be respected if they bear many children. Beatrice fears because she has only two children. But when she comes to know that her husband is not ready to take a second wife, she beams with pride. So she decides to tolerate all sort of patriarchal cruelties. Eugene's brutal attack is responsible for her several miscarriages. Kambili often witnesses the blood stains on the floor. Even in her dreams, she envisions blood flowing from her mother and from her own eyes. After every miscarriage, Eugene compels Beatrice to stay in church and confess her guilt. Even kambili does not understand for what her mother should be forgiven her. But towards the end unable to bear all such cruelties of her husband, she poisons him by ingesting rat poison in small doses into his tea and kills him. In this way, she decides to liberate herself and her children from domestic abuse. Beatrice's act of killing her husband may seem to be an inappropriate way of seeking freedom from male oppression. But **"the fact remains that the African woman can only progress in life if she totally extricates herself from the stifling background of patriarchy. No woman can call herself a doormat in Nigerian today unless she chooses to be one"**.

Thus in the novel purple hibiscus, women are the sufferers of patriarchal authority. But they struggle to achieve the much desired freedom from the clutches of tradition, patriarchy and socio-economic disempowerment of women. They determine to survive in the face of domestic violence, senseless brutality etc. kambili suffer silently in the beginning of the novel. Her journey to her Aunt's house at Nsukka gives her a chance to understand the real meaning of life and the significance of individuality. She tries to be free, courageous and powerful. At the end, she seems to be an optimist, longing for a new, fresh life and obviously she smiles whole-heartedly. She says that **"the new rains will**

come down soon”(307) which symbolizes that a new life is yet to start.

Beatrice suffers all the effects of patriarchal domination perpetuated by her husband and Igbo culture. But gradually she seems to be losing her patience. She thinks independently to quit domestic abuse. So she kills her husband. Both the characters of kambili and Beatrice reveal the fact that violence and rebellion are the natural outcome of male suppression. These women characters, in spite of being marginalized, possess a will of their own to resist the forces hazardous to their survival. Thus it gives an insight that they may be silent but not weak.

Aunty Ifeoma, on the other hand, strives to create a happy environment for the children despite the financial constraint. She shows determination and resourcefulness in bringing up her children without a husband. She knows the value of humanity. Thus Ifeoma’s character may open women’s eyes to the realities of patriarchy and also suggest alternative avenues to self-realization. Thus this study reveals how Nigerian women are suppressed and subjected to violence and physical assault in the form of patriarchy and how they try to find their own voice in a male dominated society with particular reference to *purple hibiscus*.