



Revisiting bell hooks' Theorization of 'Gender Violence' in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract— *The lived experience of two women – no matter how similar they are, be it simply by virtue of being born a woman, or sharing a similar skin colour, racial affiliation, nationality, class, religion, sexual orientation – can never be the same. Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name bell hooks, was an author and social activist who theorized on the singular nature of the black woman's travails. Across her extensive critical oeuvre there is a recurrent emphasis on the onslaughts of patriarchal hegemony that routinely victimize black women. Her theories on gender violence among black couples have now come to address diverse manifestations of sexism that widens the racial divide. hooks pointed out that gender violence is a reflection of deeply embedded African cultural ideologies and practices that are premised on women playing second fiddles to their men. In this paper I have attempted to read Adichie's Purple Hibiscus in the light of hooks' theories on gender violence to highlight the socio-cultural as well as political framings of gender within the black community.*

Keywords— *bell hooks, gender violence, patriarchal hegemony, sexism*

I. INTRODUCTION

The crux of Feminism has always been a conscious and calculated resistance to patriarchy. Feminism as an umbrella term stands problematized for a holistic representation of the broad spectrum of womanhood that is so heterogenous in its plethora of diverse races, ethnicities and nationalities that with growing awareness, it would be repugnant to ignore the uniqueness of their individual experiences and just shoehorn their struggles under the single label of 'Feminism'. The rise of Black Feminism as an equally potent and vocal movement for the rights of the black woman was thwarted by the race movement whose forefront was occupied by black men. Black women, thus, as bell hooks had put it, remain doubly enslaved, firstly by the whites, and then by their male counterparts. Sojourner Truth (1867), addressing the gender-power relationship between the black man and the black woman wrote,

there is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored woman; and if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be

masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. [1]

In her essay 'The Imperialism of Patriarchy' [2], bell hooks (1982) wrote about the innate sexist inclinations ingrained within the coloured race and which only gained further sanction with the rise of slavery (p. 100). hooks articulates how black male sexism predates American slavery and that white-supremacy in America merely enforced the hegemonic gender divide existing in the black community. In her essay 'Ending Violence' from her seminal work, *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks (2000) sensitizes the readers about the very nuanced manner in which the tipped gender-power relationship finds manifestation in the domestic sphere in the form of violence against women and children. She asserts –

Patriarchal violence in home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force. This expanded definition of domestic violence includes male violence against women, same-sex violence, and adult violence against

children. The term "patriarchal violence" is useful because unlike the more accepted phrase "domestic violence" it continually reminds the listener that violence in the home is connected to sexism and sexist thinking, to male domination. [3]

II. BLACK WOMEN'S WRITINGS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) has explored the nuanced manner in which women are still exploited within her very household and remain passive and silent victims of domestic abuse. Before segueing into Nigerian literature, it is imperative to analyse Adichie's position as a Nigerian woman novelist writing about the plight of Nigerian women in a post-colonial context. Ketu H. Katrak (2006) in her article 'Decolonizing Culture: Toward a Theory for Postcolonial Women's Texts' has rightly observed,

Women writers' [...] texts deal with, and often challenge, their dual-oppression-patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride-price, polygamy and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system... Women writers deal with the burdens of female roles in urban environments... women marginalization in actual political participation. [4]

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in her article 'Women and Nigerian Literature' for *The Guardian* in 1985 criticised Nigerian Literature as being "phallic", dominated by male writers and critics dealing exclusively with male characters while women are pathetic appendages to the narrative [5]. Commenting on the invisibility of women writers in the Nigerian literary scene and the one-sided narration of the male authors, Helen Chukwuma (2000) wrote –

...the men wrote about themselves, their wives, homes, their ideals, aspirations and conflicts, their confrontation with the white man and his ways, in sum, their society at large. They were the masters and the traditionally accepted mouthpiece of their women folk. But did they say it all? Can any being overtake the place of another? Can a male writer feel the depth of a woman's consciousness, sensibilities, femininity, impulses and indeed her weaknesses? [6]

III. GENDERING VIOLENCE IN PURPLE HIBISCUS

The female-centric novels of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie fill the void of the non-representational trend in Nigerian literature. Centred around the religious fanaticism of a

Nigerian man and the extent to which he exercises his 'corrective measures' to temper his wife and children in obeisance to him and his religion, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is an exploration of the gender violence that continues to exist in Nigerian society even today. In a socio-statistical report by the British council titled "Gender in Nigeria in 2012", it has been concluded that violence against women in Nigeria continues to be a problem, and it is worsened by the fact that such behaviour is deeply rooted in their cultural and traditional values and thus remains hidden or tacitly condoned. In her novel, Adichie problematizes the position of the women in the Nigerian household, and through the story of Kambili and her mother Beatrice, provides a gender discourse that sheds light on the perpetuation of violence against women in a post-modern world. Folashade Fashakin (2015) offers a concise view on the portrayal of domestic abuse in the novel,

...*Purple Hibiscus* takes a look at an intricate family life with events happening in Nigeria under the ruler ship of a military president as a backdrop. Using a fifteen-year-old girl, Kambili, as the narrator, she discusses the strained relationship between Eugene and his family members. The depiction of domestic violence a tyrannical father exhibited against his children and spouse allows for some criticism of both British colonialism and traditional patriarchal powers for their influences on the oppression of marginalized groups including women and children. [7]

The narrative is filtered through the eyes of the fifteen-year-old Kambili who, initially, seems to have normalized the circumlocutory routine of abuse in her household. Indeed, she is so stunned and traumatized by her father's display of brute violence that she hardly talks, and the course of the narrative traces her journey of finding her voice by overcoming patriarchal dominance. Kambili's silence, that resonates metaphorically in the narrative, also emblemizes Beatrice's silent complicity to her husband's ritualistic abuse. Beatrice, having been victimized for years on end, had normalized her husband's behaviour by ascribing to society's notion of a wife's endless obeisance to her husband no matter what. Losing her own voice, Beatrice can only helplessly witness her children's suffering. Kambili likens her mother to a bird: "She did not usually say so much at one time, she spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts" [8] An early instance of domestic violence is when Eugene beats up his pregnant wife when she refuses to visit the Priest after mass. It is Kambili who remains a passive witness to it,

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parent's hand-carved bedroom door. I

imagined the door had gotten stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true...I heard the door open. Papa's gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward than usual [...] Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme border. [8]

Adichie, through her graphic imagery, shows how gender violence borders on blood and gore as in the event which transpires after this sequence of ruthless abuse, Kambili and Jaja are seen cleaning "up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolour all the way downstairs." [8] Kambili's narration of violence in her family is steeped in a miasma of passive naivety as a result of years of psychological and physical trauma. Religion plays an integral part in the subtext of violence. Adichie illustrates how the man appropriates religion as a justification for violence against his family. Eugene's religious fanaticism comes across as a facile justification for his unending abuse, and the irony lies in the fact that in portraying himself as an agent of God, he is merely a cruel dictator, asserting time and again his patriarchal dominance over his household. Adichie herself spoke about the importance of religion in an interview –

Religion is such a huge force, so easily corruptible and yet so of doing incredible good. The streak of intolerance I see masquerading itself as faith and the way we create an image of God that suits us, are things I am interested in questioning...Religion in this novel is seen to have evolved from man's relationship with his God, to a tool for violence. [9]

The intergenerational conflict presented in *Purple Hibiscus* echoes that which has been presented by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Both relationships are marred by religious differences. Okonkwo's relationship with his son Nwoye is blighted when the latter subscribes to the new religion inducted by the whites and in Adichie's novel, Eugene's relationship with his father is strained because his father refuses to endorse Eugene's brand of Catholicism. When Kambili traverses on forbidden territory by visiting her grandfather, Eugene punishes her by baptizing her in scalding hot water,

He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet...I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding; I felt nothing for a second, and then I screamed. [8]

Violence comes as a narrative refrain served in a platter of patriarchal supremacy. It is astonishing to observe how Achebe's narrative of pre-colonial Nigerian society

resonates with Adichie's post-colonial Nigerian setup as women retain their role as a passive-witnesses to violence perpetrated by the man against other women. Just as Okonkwo's wives helplessly witness him thrashing their co-wife, so does Beatrice when her daughter is almost being pummelled to her death by Eugene. bell hooks (1984) in her essay 'Feminist Movement to End Violence' pinpoints the extant anointed hegemonic social hierarchy to be the fountainhead of such unrestrained battering of women,

While male supremacy encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women, it is the Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of violence against women...It is this belief system that is the foundation on which sexist ideology and other ideologies of group oppression are based; they can be eliminated only when this foundation is eliminated. [10]

IV. WOMANISMS IN PURPLE HIBISCUS

Aunty Ifeoma channels a completely different brand of womanism when seen in contrast with Beatrice and Kambili's subdued femininity. As a professor in a university, she is much more sensitised to the plight of women than her sister-in-law Beatrice. She has not the flamboyance of wealth like her brother Eugene, but her cramped apartment in Nsukka provides a warmth of kinship and bonding which Kambili had never felt in her father's house. In Nsukka Kambili and Beatrice is exposed to the ideology of freedom that alters their perception and subsequently the course of their fate. Kambili overcomes her silence and Jaja learns to protest against his father's tyranny and the seeds of vengeance is sown in Beatrice, nourished by all her anguish and grievance, which will germinate into a plot of murder – the only way, Beatrice realizes, that she can rid herself of her husband's torture. The purple hibiscuses grown by Ifeoma emblemizes and prefigures a liberation from patriarchal domination that Beatrice and her children will undergo. Thus, Kambili ruminates,

I lay in bed after Mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all; Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the veranda 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 undertones of freedom. [8]

Ifeoma vocalizes the climate of oppressive encumbrances in both the political and domestic planes when she articulates:

“When do we speak out, eh? When soldiers are appointed lecturers and students attend lectures with guns to their heads? When do we speak out?” [8] Adichie performs a dexterous orchestration in paralleling the political predicament of the nation with the predicament of the household – both under the manoeuvring of inhuman militant forces, the man being at the apex of all brutality. Adichie has presented Beatrice as the stereotype of the idealized African wife, and through her voices the traditional narrative of women being dependent on men for security: “A woman with children and no husband, what is that?” [8] But she is able to rise from her marginalized position when for the sake of her children and herself, she poisons her husband slowly over time which ultimately kills him. Even though it is a passive resistance to patriarchy, she is able to transcend the deeply ingrained fear of the woman without a man, and she fearlessly confesses,

I started putting poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor. [8]

The typical thinking of a conventional African man about a stereotypical African woman, with all her meekness and obeisance, is also seen in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Joy's of Motherhood*, where in an argument between Nnaife and NnuEgo, the former asks his wife not to question his manhood and reminds her of her marginalized status in the household,

[W]hat did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner? You know the airs you put on are getting rather boring. I know you are the daughter of Agbadi, pity he didn't marry you himself and keep you by his side forever. If you are going to be my wife, you must accept my work, my way of life. [11]

This sense of ownership of the wife comes from an assurance of her dispossessed state. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice's inability to protest against her husband is rooted in her financial dependence on him, and she is unable to go against culturally accepted norms as well. Being illiterate and without any skills of her own, she remains bound to be complicit with her husband's routine abuse. Violence against women who are impeded from speaking out for compulsions ranging from strong adherence to patriarchal cultures or financial dependency on the abuser is one of the areas feminist criticism addresses. Beatrice and her sister-in-law, Ifeoma, work together in the novel to create a dynamic and complex representation of the postcolonial Nigerian woman. Adichie presents two women who are essentially opposing models of postcolonial feminism. Beatrice is docile and traditional, yet finds strength to quietly rebel against the power of her husband. Ifeoma is

zealous, strong and vocal about her disapproval of the current gender relations in Nigeria. Alongside these two women figures is the metamorphosis of Kambili. In his article 'Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*' Ogaga Okuyade (2009) comments –

the growth process of the protagonist, Kambili, as she struggles to make her mouth function within the totalitarian temperament of her father's home...she seems to be a mere observer and victim, but as the novel drags towards its denouement, she realizes her voice and role in the home after her awakening [12]

V. CONCLUSIONS

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, thus, serves as an apt explication of bell hooks' theorization on 'Gender Violence'. It is indeed, as bell hooks has put it, “patriarchy [which has] allowed all men to completely rule women in their families, to decide their fate, to shape their destiny”, and it is therefore that men “could freely batter women with no fear of punishment.” Adichie's work reveals the gender dynamics at work and how it is even affected by other social factors like religion, class, power, and authority. The brand of masculinity represented by Eugene is an accurate portrait of African masculinity in postcolonial Nigeria. The final triumph that Adichie grants her tormented women protagonists is a bold statement on feminine liberation from the incarceration of socially legitimized patriarchy.

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