



VIOLENCE DOMESTIC AND POLITICAL: BLOOD VS. BLOSSOM CHIMAMANDA'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

DR. SONA AGRAWAL ¹

¹ ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN ENGLISH, GOVT. COLLEGE, NIWAI (TONK)

ABSTRACT:

KEYWORDS:

Violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.

(*World Health Organization, 2002*)

Violence is the filthiest and deeply rooted practice prevalent since times immemorial. It exists in various forms and at different levels- political, social, cultural, psychological, physical, sexual, or domestic. It eats into the vitality of any nation, institution, group or individual and threatens not only the body but psyche as well in numerous complex ways. The widely accepted definition of violence- sometimes termed as "intentional interpersonal injury"- is: "behaviour by persons against persons that intentionally threatens, attempts, or actually inflicts physical harm" (Reiss and Roth, 1993). The criminologists and psychologists often focus on individual's personality, family background and physiological abnormalities to find out as to why individuals commit violence.

Sometimes the occurrence of violence is associated with social set up, as sexual or domestic violence is attributed to patriarchal hegemony, which gives a man right to control wives and children. Al Mines defines domestic violence as a prototype of abusive behaviour in which a person uses intimidation, fraud, pestering, humiliation, manoeuvring, and force to establish or maintain power and control over his partner. Economic, emotional, psychological, physical, sexual, and verbal tactics are used by perpetrators to control and obtain power over their partners. Domestic violence crosses ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, and socioeconomic lines. The majority of victims of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships are women. One out of every three adult women experiences at least one physical assault. In recent years, the definition of domestic violence has expanded to include other forms of violence, such as the abuse of elders, children, and siblings.

South Africa has the worst known figures for gender-based violence. The rates of sexual violence against women and children, and the failure of criminal justice and health systems to hold back the catastrophe, suggests an unacknowledged gendered civil war. This muggy debate, demonizes black men, consolidates racial fences, and greatly thwarts both revelation and educational efforts.

Sexual violence in South Africa is fuelled by justificatory narratives that are entrenched in apartheid practices that legitimized violence by the overriding group against the disempowered, not only in blatantly political arenas, but in social, and domestic spheres as well. In post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, sexual violence has become a socially endorsed punitive project for maintaining patriarchal hegemony.

This paper examines how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the most prominent young writer of Nigerian origin, considered to be the brilliant successor of Chinua Achebe, in her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2007) has thread-barely discussed the problems of politics, freedom, gender and development within the threshold of ascendancy in Africa. The remonstrations are raised in Africa against bad governance in different forms. But the realities are far much callous and biting, that force the writers to fiddle with their 'pens' to contain or rather represent these excesses. Chimamanda's *Purple Hibiscus* gently tugs at the heartstrings of her readers while attempting to delineate this bitter tale through words. This beautiful, scintillating, engrossing and sometimes horrific story embroils the readers' attention from the very first line that keeps on lingering till its end and even after that. The need to narrate a realistic tale of human beings with flesh and blood impelled the emergence of the heroine of the novel, Kambili, a fifteen years old girl in Achike family. She is a new voice crying out to be heard because of the torment and distress in the impediment of governance and civilization around her. This adolescent character reveals in somewhat innocent 'silence', the painful realities

wreaking the then society.

Abusive relationship, whether it be between a husband and a wife, father and daughter, or father and son takes a toll on the person. In the case of Achike family, Eugene, the father of Kambili and Jaja, strives for perfection. He doesn't hate his family, he loves them dearly, his intentions are good but the way he goes about doing it is morally wrong. The novel opens with the lines "Things start 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...." (3). This reminds the readers of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and leads them consciously or unconsciously to acknowledge that as in Achebe's so also in Chimamanda's novel something is going wrong that too due to the obdurate attitude of the elder of the family. In Achebe's Okonkwo thinks that whatever he feels or does is correct. Unlike his father he becomes industrious, affluent, valiant, violent, and opposed to music and anything else that he perceives to be "spongy", such as conversation and emotion. He is also the hardest-working member of his clan. He abuses and beats his wives and children, kills Ikemefuna, a boy adopted from other village, and ultimately kills a messenger of the missionaries. Okonkwo's life is dominated by fear of failure and of Achilles' heel—the fear that he will resemble his father, that makes him violent, aggressive and wrathful. Ironically, in all his efforts not to end up like his father, he commits suicide, becoming in his culture an abomination to the Earth and rebuked by the tribe as his father Unoka was who died from swelling. Okonkwo's suicide (violence against himself) represents not only the culture rebuking him, but him rebuking his people's changing culture. He realizes that the Igbo culture that he loved had been forever altered by the emergence and ensuing influence of Christian missionaries.

Unlike Okonkwo, in Chimamanda's novel Eugene is greatly predisposed by Christian missionaries and attempts towards getting perfection in following Christian ways of living. Like them he becomes an oblate as Kambili depicts, "Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year...." (3). He tries to maintain a strict, stifling and stern Catholic environment in his household. The narrative stirs one's compassion for Kambili (his daughter), her brother Jaja and their quiet mother, who are at the centre of the repressive, dominative and patriarchal world of Eugene. Outwardly, they have all kinds of luxuries and affluences because Eugene is a wealthy man who owns factories, publishes a politically outspoken newspaper. He is humble and provides financial assistance to Igbo community who in turn call him Omelora 'the one who does for the community'. However within the precincts of his home, he is a strict follower of Catholic ways, a religious fanatic who punishes or rather beats his children and wife even at the slightest deviation from his so-called extremely Christian ways of living.

There is a scene in the book where he punishes Kambili by

pouring steaming hot water on her feet. While he does this he cries along with her. His tears show that he is sorry that he is doing this, but he continues anyways because in his mind it is the only right thing to do. This is another aspect of abusive relationships, the fact that the abuser does not see his wrong. Eugene beats his wife and two children because he thinks it is the right form of discipline. Despite the way he treats Kambili, she constantly feels that she must make him feel proud of her. The novel is saturated with the instances of abuse and tyranny portrayed by Kambili's father Eugene, who is both evil and loving, both benevolent protector and emotional terrorist. He is strong in his faith and believes that no wrong must go unpunished, no matter how severe. He doesn't seem to notice the negative effect it has on his family.

When Jaja and Kambili come to know that their mother is pregnant then Jaja declares that "We will take care of the baby; we will protect him" (23). This line clearly depicts as to what is going on in the mind of the siblings, but the question is against whom they want to protect the baby? Who is going to be dangerous for the baby? Later, the clouds of doubt are scattered when it is disclosed that Father Eugene hits his wife that causes the killing of the foetus. When again, Kambili is living with her aunty then her mother approaches Ifeoma's home and discloses, "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 even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it" (248).

The novel is full of such instances of domestic violence. Once when Kambili tries to protect Papa Nnukwu's painting given to her by her cousin Amaka then Eugene endlessly kicks her with metal buckles on his slippers that left her with broken ribs and internal bleeding. Aunty Ifeoma comes to meet her and suggests, "When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (213).

The use of the growing character technique enables Adichie to achieve historical exposition of the trauma in African society. One observes with keenness, the narrative stance of the dumb character that exposes several military idiosyncrasies with the eyes of an innocent observer. Set in the postcolonial period of unrest, the hibiscus flower serves as a potent symbol of resistance of violence towards women. The novel critically presents the oddities in Nigeria as well as Africa in general, as the continent trudges in the biting tyrannical trauma of the anarchical leadership. The Colonialism has a strong hold on the people's psychology, and this may continue to haunt African society long after the European colonizers had left the continent. Adichie's novel presents the colonial experience from an African perspective and it does so without romanticizing the African past.

Both inner and outer turmoil is perceived in the novel. Inner tumult is going on in the heart of Kambili, Jaja and their mother who are the victims of domestic violence, external mayhem is caused by political violence that

disturbs even the otherwise peaceful life of Auntie Ikemefuna and her children. The scarcity of the means of livelihood, crisis of identity, the involvement of educational institutions in this furore, riots by the students, scarcity of petrol and hike in petrol rates, endless checking in the houses, imprisonment and killing of those who were considered to be suspicious because of raising the voice against the prevalent political scenario are certain examples of political uproar reflected through the eyes of Kambili while she is residing in her aunt Ifeoma's home.

The 'matter of fact' normalcy of domestic violence in the Achike household, the fear this breeds as well as the physical and psychological impact of such violence is what is irrefutably shocking about this book. Jaja and Kambili only hint to one another about the apparent cruelty they suffer, speaking through what Kambili calls "the language of the eyes" (Adichie, 305) or through subtle remarks that need no explanation.

Eugene Achike is a man with two faces: one as a loving family man and public patron; the other as a terrifying, brutal and obsessively religious monster who runs his household with the truncheon of fear and force. He becomes more abhorrent after the horrifying unspeakable hot water incident and later when Kambili ends up in hospital. Mama (Sister Beatrice Achike) initially appears to be a timid character but the reader can soon recognize that still waters run deep. Abuse, whether psychological or physical, where as in this case both, can destroy a person emotionally and mentally. They might even go as far as ending their own lives or ending the life of the person who has caused the chaos in their life. This is seen towards the end of the novel when Kambili's mother realizes that until or unless Eugene is alive, she along with her children cannot live a happy and peaceful life, she starts poisoning her husband, an act that requires a lot of courage. She has to pay a hefty price in the form of her husband's death, so that they can all move on with the promise of breaking free from the past. In reality occurrences like this do not cease to exist. Infact it happens daily in the real world. The solution people like Kambili's mother have chosen to resolve her familial problem is nowhere near right; it was just an act of desperation, an attempt to get rid of this tyrannical lifestyle.

Kambili and Jaja never experience 'real' love beyond the sipping of their father's hot tea as Kambili cries out that, "the tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, my raw tongue suffered"(8). The heaviness of violence and religious dogma in the Achike household is balanced with love from the extended family – the love and care of Papa's sister, auntie Ifeoma. Auntie Ifeoma becomes synonymous with the freedom and vibrancy of her purple hibiscus as she along with her children show Kambili and Jaja a different way to live. Jaja falls in love with flowers and other chores. He visits scenes and places and exchanges gifts and experiences. He sees the love of a 'heathen' grandfather (as

per Eugene's understanding and view point) who tells Kambili and him moral folk tales. They also get the love of a reverend father (Father Amadi) who provides the needed atmosphere for peace and joy. Kambili sees the love of a sister who teaches her to cook meals, care for others and accommodate people around her. Father Amadi, a young priest and family friend is a fine specimen of psychologically healthy manhood when he takes an interest in Kambili and helps her break free from the warped admiration she has of her father. He sees in Kambili the character of a heroine who talks less but acts more in her mind, as he tells Amaka, "she does not waste her energy in picking never-ending arguments. But there is a lot going on in her mind, I can tell" (173). He is a mirror that shows up all that 'Papa' should be but is not. The role of women in Igbo society and the patriarchal dominance of men is one that is evident. At least in this particular household, a woman is seen as subservient. Such suppression is portrayed as dangerous as there are limits to human endurance. Press freedom – the lack of it – is explored as well as the political landscape of a military Nigeria. Brother Eugene's only redeeming quality is that he 'cares' about the common man and the freedom of civil society. And this is the irony – a man who cares so much about God and public freedom but muffles his household with fear and violence, and rejects his 'heathen' father.

This novel is packed with memorable, fallible, passionate and vulnerable characters. It shatters the view that family is always a great depository of security. Kambili, Jaja and their mother have no space, whether physical or mental, they are alienated and isolated, even in their own home, until Eugene is living.

While depicting the intimacy of the violence and its aftermaths the novel focuses on a native African flower, the hibiscus, as a symbol of both the memory of violence and the protagonists' refusal to be determined by that violence. Purple Hibiscus is a hybrid which represents the changes Kambili must undertake if she is to endure the abuse in her family and the corruption in her country. The novel ends with the women attempting to chart a new life for themselves, erasing the fractures of violence in the renewal of flowers. *Purple Hibiscus* is definitely a tender, credible and enormously moving human document.

REFERENCES

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Ed. Abiola Irele. New York: Norton, 2009.
2. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007.
3. Krug et al. "World Report on Violence and Health". *World Health Organization*, 2002.
4. Lystad, Mary, Matilda Rice, and Sandra Kaplan. "Domestic Violence". in *Family Violence: A Clinical*

andLegal Guide. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1996. p. 45.

5. Miles, Al. "Violence in Families". in *What Every Christian Needs to Know*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2002.

6. Reiss, A. J., and Roth, J. A., eds.. *Understanding and Preventing Violence*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1993.

7. http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/chimamandan_goziadichie

8. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chimamanda_Ngozi_Adichie

9. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/violence>