

African Research Review

An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia

Vol. 8(4), Serial No. 35, September, 2014:17-27

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070--0083 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v8i4.2>

Feminism: Silence and Voicelessness as Tools of Patriarchy in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

*Feminism is a broad based and diverse movement that seeks to protect and promote the interests of women; it is the radical notion that women are people/human beings. The rights of women are an integral part of human rights. Feminism works hand in hand with egalitarianism (human equality) towards achieving the equality of the sexes in a perfect utopian state. Though patriarchy takes different forms in different cultures, its different belief is the same. The man is superior by nature, born to rule in all works of life, the woman, and inferior, born to be ruled and to serve the man. The paper highlights how the woman must take a second place in society. In fact she is meant only to be seen and not to be heard. This age-long mentality portrays how patriarchy expands racism, sexism and classism. It underscores all forms of oppression where one set of human beings sees self as the norm and evaluates others as existing only for self. This paper takes a cursory look at the patriarchal and hegemonic system of leadership in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the plight of the*

feminine gender. It looks at how the system leads the female characters into solitude, voicelessness and a loss of their identities.

Introduction

Patriarchy, subservience, hegemony, oppression led to the quest for women emancipation. Women want to be recognized and identified as human beings too after all, we are first human beings before the classification into gender, class etc. The bone of contention is power but women are not asking for a total emasculation of men just that men and women should co-habit peacefully in complementary distribution. African feminism is all about gender inclusion and not alienation. Molaria Leslie – Ogundipe buttresses this point in her version of African feminism termed STIWA/STIWANISM which means social transformation including women in Africa. Other feminist writers came up with their own versions like Motherism (Catherine Acholonu), Negofeminism (Obioma Nnaemeka), Snail Sense Feminism (Akachi Delimora-Ezigbo), Femalism (Chroma Opara) and Focus Feminis (Onyeka Iwuchukwu).

Patriarchy, Hegemony and Subjugation

The patriarchal household of Eugene Achike reflect the saying Orwell's Animal Farm that:

All Animals are equal

But some are more equal

Than others

A patriarchal society is a male dominated society. It is an institution of male-rule and privilege that thrives on female subordination that is why most forms of feminism characterize patriarchy as a wicked social system of rule that is oppressive to women because it is an exertion of male dominance over women. The underlying factor in patriarchy is power and status. Struggles over power and control are often struggles over whose words get used and whose do not and over who gets to speak and who does not (Johnstone, 2008). The men in order to assert their power over the women, the women must be silent. Unfortunately most women accept this as their lot.

The traditional African society is a patriarchal society is characterized by current and historic unequal power relations between women and men where women are systematically disadvantaged, subdued and oppressed. Hegemony, subjugation and subservience are all factors of patriarchy. Influence and control of one group over another in order to conquer, control, make submissive and less important.

These years of patriarchy, subjugation and subservience led to the feminism movements, a rejection of subservience and a search for self importance. According to Chukwuma,

Feminism means ... a rejection of inferiority and a shining for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity (ix).

Feminism is for the self-actualization of women so that they will believe in themselves, actualizes their dreams; live fulfilled lives and generally not live in fear of men. According to Frank (1984),

Feminism is a profoundly individualistic philosophy: It values personal growth and individual fulfilment over any larger communal needs or good. African society, of course, even in its most westernized modern forms, places the values of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African feminist almost seems a contradiction in terms.

The feminist movement has been misunderstood, especially by the male folk, as a threat to their supremacy. But the key word, especially in African feminism, is inclusion and not alienation. "In Africa, (North Africa inclusive), feminism is seen as a threat to patriarchy especially where patriarchal norms contribute to the relegation of women to the background" (Salami-Agunloye qtd in Emenyonu and Eke 2010). The idea is not to castrate men of their power and hand over to women but feminism preaches co-existence. In the words of Steady (1981),

A genuine African feminism recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples.

Female/feminist writers, over the years, have been lending their voices to the feminist movement from the time of Flora Nwapa up until now - a rejection of those years where female characters were very much voiceless and male characters have all the powers assigned to them. In the words of Salami-Agunloye,

These images and depiction of womanhood are as fashioned by the patriarchal system. Male characters in the novel treat their subjects (females) as subservient, docile, timid, with low status and dependent absolutely on male figures around them, especially their husbands; they are passive victims of male oppression, and without agency (qtd in Emenyonu and Eke 177).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminism refers to the struggle for the defence and expansion of women while feminist is the individual engaged in the struggle. Feminist theory therefore, is a generalized wide ranging system of ideas about social life and human experience developed from women centre perspective (Ritzer, 1996).

Feminism seeks to give the women a sense of self as worthy, effectual, and contributing human beings. It is a theoretical and ideological framework that directly opposes sexism by supporting gender equality. This is to say that feminism is a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless. All these deny them a positive identity and fulfilment of self. In Africa; women are yet to achieve this fulfilment because in the socio-cultural sphere women are the quiet members of the community and the home.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses her literary work, *Purple Hibiscus*, to bring to limelight, what is obtainable in many African homes. The tyrannical, wicked and hypocritical life of Eugene Achike and how he rules his household is a typical example of the patriarchal way of life found in some families especially in Africa.

Orie(2011) buttresses this point and says that,

Eugene (papa) is the symbol of patriarchy whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps the females under fear, tension: so, they are silenced. In fact, Kambili early on, sounds lachrymal: "I felt suffocated" (p. 7), and at another time bursts out, bemused: "fear, I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours".

The lives of his wife and children revolve around Eugene's rigid and carefully mapped out schedule which leaves no room for idleness or personal free time. Kambili narrates thus

Jaja sat on my bed for a while longer before he went downstairs to have lunch; I pushed my textbook aside, looked up, and stared at my daily schedule, pasted on the wall above me. Kambili was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as Jaja was written on the schedule above Jaja's desk in his room. I wondered when papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother, if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across

each day, separating study siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep. He revised them often. (Adichie, p. 32).

The members of Eugene Achike's household do not have a mind of their own instead they live at his mercy and according to his dictates. "Thanks be to God". It was what Jaja and I said, what Papa expected us to say, when good things happened" (p. 28). "He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English (p. 21) "I turned to stare at him. At least he was saying thanks the right way, the way we always did after a meal. But he was also doing what we never did: he was leaving the task before papa had said the prayer after meals (p. 22)

When Mr. Achike broke the wife's figurine he neither felt sorry nor did he apologise. When the wife came into the room she was shocked but could not say a word."She stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with bare hands. The silence was broken only by the whirl of the ceiling fan as it sliced through the still air."

Papa's love is quite harsh and brutal and he doles it out at every given time. This could be exemplified in his famous love sip which burns and scalds his children's tongues. "Jaja took a sip, placed the cup back on the saucer. Papa picked it up and gave it to me. I held it with both hands, took a sip of the lipton tea with sugar and milk, and placed it back on the saucer. "Thank you, Papa," I said, feeling the love burn my tongue" (p. 39).

He equally employed the use of Domestic violence in championing his cause. Eugene beats, maltreats and even burns them with hot water at any slightest provocation or "failure" on their part. He beats and abuses Beatrice almost on a daily basis and she miscarries her baby on one of such incidents.

According to the narrator (Kambili),

I was in my room after lunch, reading James chapter five because I would talk about the biblical roots of the anointing of the sicj during family time, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand carved bedroom door. I imagined the door had got stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true. I sat down, closed my eyes, and started to count. Counting made it seem not that long, made it seem not that bad. Sometimes it was over before I even got to twenty. I was at nineteen when the sounds stopped. I heard the door open. Papa's gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual (p. 41).

Many times, Papa praises himself for punishing his family because they committed acts of sin while he remains the righteous and perfect father without no guile or sin. He feels violence is a way of purging their sins and not allowing the devil have his way in their lives. He says

“Has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him?” The Igbo words burst out of Papa’s mouth. “Has the devil built a tent in my house?” He turned to Mama. “You sit there and watch her desecrate the Eucharistic fast, maka nnidi?” He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather covered buckle. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back (Adichie, p. 110).

‘Papa was like a Fulani nomad as –although he did not have their spare, tall body as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja and me.’

Generally, the entire members of the house live in fear of Papa as their lives revolve round his do’s, don’ts and severe punishment awaits whoever flaunts his orders.

Silence and Voicelessness as Tools of Patriarchy in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

“Silence represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social organization in which males assume power and create for females an inferior status”. (D’Almeida, 1994) In a patriarchal society, many voiceless women abound and many have gone uncelebrated. According to Uwakwe(1995), “silence comprises all imposed restrictions on women’s social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or muted female structure”.

In Africa, it is common knowledge that a woman’s personhood ends in the kitchen. Even in the religious sphere, a woman/wife is expected to live in submission to her man/husband. The Holy Bible says in 1Timothy chapter 2 verse 11-12, “Let a woman learn in quietness, in entire submissiveness. I allow no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to remain in quietness and keep silence [in religious assemblies] (Amplified Bible). Women in the Islamic world are equally not spared as their identities are well hidden by their hijabs. The hijab serve as a physical, psychological and social covering to them. The feminist movement is geared towards helping women speak out for themselves; say no to subservience and embark on a mission of self recovery. To buttress this point

By voiceless, we mean the historical absence of the woman writer’s text: the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery,

colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues. By voicelessness we also mean silence: the inability to express a position in the language of the "master" as well as the textual construction of woman as silent. Voicelessness also denotes articulation that goes unheard (Okuyade, 2009).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the author showcases how silence is used as a weapon of patriarchy. It is believed that a voiceless person is left with no sense of belonging. The use of silence or muting leads to domestic servitude. The words "silence" and "silent" are ubiquitous in the novel. The members of Eugene Achike's household live in a deafening silence; they are friends of "silence" and practice silence wherever they go. Kambili narrates thus:

"The silence was broken only by the whirl of the ailing fan as it sliced through the still air. Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated". (15) he ate silently... "Pass the salt, please", Papa said. We all reached for the salt at the same time. Jaja and I touched the crystal shaker, my finger brushed his gently, then he let go. I passed it to Papa. The silence stretched out even longer" (p. 20) Silence hung over the table like the blue-black clouds in the middle of rainy season" (p. 40) The silence he left was heavy but comfortable, like a well-worn, prickly cardigan on a bitter morning" (p. 77) "We went upstairs to change, Jaja and Mama and I. Our steps on the stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays: the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch; the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture passage or a book by one of the early church fathers to read and meditate on; the silence of evening rosary; the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterwards. Even our family time on Sundays was quiet, without chess games or newspaper discussions, more in tune with the Day of Rest" (p. 39).

Patriarchy leads to silence which in turn leads to fear. They live in extreme veneration of Papa (Eugene) like he is a supreme being or deity. According to Leslie-Ogundipe,

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed (p. 35).

The above sentence exemplifies what is obtainable in Eugene Achike's household as Beatrice and her children live in fear of Papa who is never pleased by their actions. "The narrator tells us that "Beatrice's voice grew too distant" (24). But

we should understand why her voice comes so low: she rarely talks, for she is afraid” (Orie 2011). Cooper concurs and states that

Throughout the novel, we see Kambili’s inability to cope emotionally with the mixed feelings of love and terror for her father, and adoration and disdain for her passive, abused mother, all of which she is unable either to acknowledge or understand. Kambili stutters, chokes on her words, stammers and whispers. How does she find her voice...? (p. 3)

Beatrice and her children, especially her children her children takes solace in paralingualism. They communicate with their spirits and eyes. Their eyes interconnect without an exchange of words. In the words of the narrator, “Papa is hosting a church council meeting today”, Jaja said. “I heard him telling Mama”. What time is the meeting?” “Before noon”. And with his eye he said, *we can spend time together then*” (67) “When he came out, still crossing himself as if he had been in too much of a hurry to leave the room, I asked him with my eyes if he had remembered the lie to Papa-Nnukwu, and he nodded” (p. 113)

“Do you want to go to Nsukka?” I asked when we got to the landing, “Yes”, he said, and his eyes said he knew I did, too. And I could not find the words in our eye language to tell him how my throat tightened at the thought of five days without Papa’s voice, without his footsteps on the stairs” (p. 116).

It is unbelievable that the same person, Eugene Achike, who urges his editor, Ade Coker, to make sure that *The Standard* speaks out against the government muzzle/gags his household. Sisi, the house help, had no identification to him, he refers to her as *that girl* throughout the novel. “Ask that girl to bring it”, Papa said. (20) “Yes”, Papa said. “Ask that girl to bring more bottled juice” (106)

Conclusion

A Quest for Voice and Identity

Beatrice personifies the stereotyped image of African women as subdued, victimized, voiceless and subservient. A human being’s voice is one of the person’s precious assets so, anyone without a voice is bound to go in search of it. In her journey to “find herself”, Beatrice takes the law into her hands, goes on a personal vendetta and slowly poisons Papa to death. She had to free herself and her children from the shackles of patriarchy, having had enough of the many years of subjugation and subservience characterized by domestic violence, verbal abuse and torture. Papa nearly beat Kambili to death for possessing a painting of Papa Nnukwu (Eugene’s heathen father). “Mama does not talk back or challenge Papa’s violence against her but she takes action that speaks the loudest.” (Orie 2011)

Many women who find themselves in such situations resign to fate. But the bold ones always find a way to set themselves free. Okuyade (2009) asserts that,

Kambili's mother, an embodiment of the traditional African woman, who is unsophisticated and content with the economic security her husband guarantees, decides to liberate her children and herself from her husband's sinking philosophy. She is about the most interesting character in the novel. She steps out of her enervating state, fractures the patriarchal social structure and demystifies the idealized traditional images of the African woman. She puts behind the psychological rift between her body and mind and liberates herself from the marginal status she assumes at the beginning of the novel as she begins to doctor her husband's meals. It is this aspect of the novel that gives it a very radical feminist outlook.

Beatrice's action can be likened to that of Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. All the men in Nora's life betray her. Her husband sees her as a play thing to be trampled upon. Although Nora did not murder her husband, she took a walk from the marriage. In the words of Frank (1984),

Ten or fifteen years have passed since 'happily ever after', the "angel" in the house is restless and unhappy, her children well on the way to being grown, their father a tyrant or stranger or perhaps just a bore. In a pattern that goes back to Ibsen's *A Doll House*, our heroine slams the door on her domestic prison, journeys out into the great world, slays the dragon of her parochial society, and triumphantly discovers the grail of feminism by 'finding herself'.

Many women in our contemporary society live like Beatrice and Nora. Some have exited their domestic prisons while some are suffering in silence. According to Salami-Agunloye (qtd in Cooper, 2010) "In many African societies, being a wife is nearly as bad as being a slave or a bond woman as has been illustrated by many writers".

Kambili, on the other hand, got herself discovery after the first visit to Nsukka. She finds herself in an entire different world devoid of hostility, violence and tyranny. Papa's death finally gave her the freedom she so badly wanted. She revolted because of the painting of Papa Nnukwu that was in her possession, her very first action on her road to self discovery which nearly led her to her grave. According to Orie(2011

Now that the monster is got rid of, now that Papa is dead, now that patriarchy has been murdered, Kambili gets loosened of the chains of silence and voicelessness, she gets a rather swift liberation. And she exclaims her

question: “Why did you put it in his tea? She reports frenetically, of her hysteria: “My voice was loud. I was almost screaming” (p. 290). “She begins to take charge” (p. 40).

The sudden death of patriarchy brought freedom and liberation to the household of Eugene Achike. Many women, like Assatou of Ba’s *So Long a Letter* and Firdaus of El-Sadaawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, find ways to break free from years of subservience, subjugation, hegemony and ultimately; Patriarchal. According to Diala-Ogamba, “Dehumanization, patriarchal and biased religious laws lead to debasement of humanity and the enslavement of the mind” (qtd in Ajileye, Duruaku & king Dribisala (2009).

In this day and age when a lot of women lose their lives in the hands of their husbands women and indeed society at large should arise against this great injustice because at creation God made the woman a help suitable for the man and not a slave.

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