

AN ALLEGORICAL READING OF CHIMAMANDANGOZIADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*: FEMINIST AND POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus has been widely celebrated for its nuanced exploration of domestic violence, adolescence, and religious tension. However, less attention has been given to its function as a multilayered allegory that reflects the socio-political, religious, and gendered dimensions of postcolonial Nigeria. This study examines the novel through a combined feminist and postcolonial lens, arguing that Adichie uses domestic spaces, familial hierarchies, religious authority, and symbolic motifs to critique patriarchal oppression and colonial legacies. Drawing on scholarship by Stobie (2010), Wallace (2012), Nwankwo (2018), Ahire (2025), Karthiga et al. (2022), Suleiman et al. (2023), and Van Klinken (2024), the study demonstrates that the Achike household functions as an allegorical microcosm of authoritarian power, while Auntie Ifeoma's household represents resistance, cultural negotiation, and gendered autonomy. The purple hibiscus itself emerges as a symbol of transformation, hope, and liberation. This paper contends that by blending intimate familial narratives with national and cultural critique, Adichie's Purple Hibiscus offers a profound allegorical meditation on the intersections of patriarchy, postcolonial identity, and the struggle for self-determination. This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology grounded in close textual analysis and informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The research analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus as an allegorical narrative that reflects intersections of domestic patriarchy, religious authority, and postcolonial power structures.

Key words: Domestic violence, Allegory, Feminist, Postcolonial lens, Cultural negotiation

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is widely acclaimed for its exploration of adolescence, domestic violence, and the complex socio-political realities of postcolonial Nigeria. While it can be read as a contemporary narrative, a deeper reading reveals a layered allegorical narrative that critiques authoritarianism, patriarchal control, and the lingering effects of colonialism (Stobie, 2010). Through the experiences of Kambili Achike, the novel portrays the intersection of personal and political oppression, showing how domestic spaces often reflect broader societal hierarchies. Eugene Achike, Kambili's father, functions both as a tyrannical figure within the family and as a symbolic representation of entrenched authority in postcolonial Nigeria. Scholars argue that the novel's domestic allegory extends to critique institutionalized religion, governance, and social

conformity, positioning Adichie as a key voice in contemporary African literature (Wallace, 2012; Nwankwọ, 2018).

The Achike household represents a microcosm of patriarchal and authoritarian structures, where rigid Catholic practices intersect with violent control. Eugene's obsession with moral and religious perfection establishes a climate of fear that silences his family, particularly Kambili and her mother, Beatrice. This domestic oppression mirrors historical and contemporary societal hierarchies, showing the interplay between personal subjugation and broader systemic domination (Stobie, 2010). Wallace (2012) highlights that Eugene's violent enforcement of religious norms exemplifies the paradoxes of postcolonial morality, where the guise of righteousness masks coercion and abuse. The novel demonstrates how such patriarchal authority is maintained through both physical control and psychological manipulation, creating a space where obedience is enforced and autonomy is suppressed. Nwankwọ (2018) further notes that this allegorical depiction critiques the enduring influence of colonial ideologies on domestic and national governance.

In contrast to the oppressive Achike home, Auntie Ifeoma's household embodies freedom, dialogue, and cultural negotiation. Her home fosters intellectual curiosity, open communication, and emotional warmth, symbolizing spaces of resistance and alternative social models (Ahire, 2025). The stark contrast between Eugene's authoritarianism and Ifeoma's liberal environment illustrates the novel's thematic tension between domination and emancipation. Kambili's exposure to this household encourages her gradual awakening, both emotionally and intellectually, serving as a symbolic model for personal and societal transformation (Karthiga et al., 2022). The novel's narrative thus positions domestic spaces as allegorical arenas where power, ideology, and culture are contested, highlighting how resistance can emerge within intimate family structures.

Religious symbolism in *Purple Hibiscus* further reinforces the allegorical critique of authority. Eugene's extreme Catholicism represents both the lingering influence of colonial power and the internalised oppression that perpetuates patriarchal structures (Wallace, 2012). The novel contrasts rigid religious adherence with practices grounded in moderation and dialogue, as seen in Ifeoma's spiritual approach, creating an allegorical discourse on the negotiation between colonial imposition and postcolonial self-determination (Nwankwọ, 2018). This religious allegory exposes how dogma can serve as a tool for control, while flexibility and open-mindedness foster liberation and cultural hybridity. By intertwining

religious critique with family dynamics, Adichie emphasises that liberation requires both structural and psychological transformation.

Gendered analysis reveals the nuanced exploration of power and agency within the novel. Kambili's constrained voice, fragmented thoughts, and hesitancy reflect her internalisation of patriarchal authority, illustrating how gendered oppression operates both physically and psychologically (Suleiman et al., 2023). Van Klinken (2024) examines the novel's representation of masculinity, showing that even benevolent male figures remain constrained by patriarchal norms, emphasising that the struggle for freedom is both structural and relational. The narrative foregrounds women's experiences, resilience, and negotiation of agency, demonstrating how feminist and postcolonial perspectives are essential for understanding the interplay of domestic, cultural, and political allegory in the novel.

The titular purple hibiscus serves as a powerful symbol of resistance, transformation, and hope. Its rarity and unconventional colour represent deviation from imposed norms, embodying both personal and cultural emancipation (Nwankwo, 2018; Ahire, 2025). Through symbolic motifs, contrasting domestic spaces, and gendered narratives, Adichie constructs an allegorical framework that critiques patriarchy, colonial legacies, and authoritarian governance. This study situates *Purple Hibiscus* at the intersection of feminist and postcolonial critique, exploring how domestic, religious, and cultural symbols collectively depict Nigeria's struggles with power, identity, and self-determination. The novel ultimately emphasises that liberation requires reimagining authority, fostering dialogue, and cultivating resilience within both private and public spheres.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive literary methodology grounded in close textual analysis and informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. The research analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as an allegorical narrative that reflects intersections of domestic patriarchy, religious authority, and postcolonial power structures. Primary data is derived exclusively from the text of the novel, with attention to characterization, narrative perspective, symbolism, and thematic patterns. Close reading enables the identification of narrative strategies that reveal embedded critiques of gender, culture, and authority.

Secondary data consists of peer-reviewed scholarly articles and theoretical texts that illuminate the interpretive lens. Feminist theorists such as Moi (1985) and Spivak (1988)

guide the examination of gendered subjectivity, while postcolonial theorists such as Said (1978) and Bhabha (1994) inform the analysis of cultural hybridity and colonial legacies. Studies by Stobie (2010), Wallace (2012), Suleiman et al. (2023), and others provide contemporary critical perspectives on Adichie's work.

The analysis synthesizes insights from these frameworks to interpret characters, domestic spaces, and symbols—such as the purple hibiscus—as allegorical vehicles. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how the novel represents personal and national struggles for liberation within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts.

Theoretical Framework

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* can be analysed effectively through a feminist theoretical lens, which foregrounds the ways gender, power, and social hierarchies operate within domestic and public spheres. Feminist literary theory examines how patriarchal structures are reproduced through culture, language, and institutional power, shaping both men's and women's experiences (Moi, 1985). In the novel, the Achike household exemplifies such structures, where Eugene's authoritarian control over Kambili and Beatrice symbolises the normalization of male dominance. Feminist analysis enables an understanding of the gendered experiences of oppression and the processes through which women internalize, resist, or negotiate authority. By situating the narrative within this lens, it becomes possible to explore how Adichie portrays women's agency in spaces constrained by patriarchal norms, and how these dynamics mirror larger societal patterns, highlighting the intersection between domestic and structural power in postcolonial contexts.

Postcolonial theory provides a complementary framework for interpreting *Purple Hibiscus*, particularly in relation to the lingering effects of colonialism on Nigerian society. Eugene's rigid Catholicism and preference for Western education reflect the internalisation of colonial ideologies, demonstrating how colonial legacies persist in post-independence governance, culture, and familial authority (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994). Postcolonial theory emphasises the negotiation of identity, power, and resistance in societies affected by colonization, highlighting the tensions between indigenous traditions and imposed Western norms. In the novel, these tensions are manifested in the contrast between the Achike and Ifeoma households, with the latter embodying more flexible, culturally hybrid approaches. This lens helps uncover the allegorical dimensions of Adichie's work, illustrating how

domestic dynamics symbolically reflect national struggles with colonial inheritance, authoritarian authority, and the ongoing quest for cultural and political autonomy.

Feminist postcolonial theory, which merges these two perspectives, is particularly useful for analyzing *Purple Hibiscus*. This approach foregrounds the intersection of gender, power, and colonial history, enabling a nuanced understanding of how women and men experience authority differently in postcolonial societies (Spivak, 1988). Kambili's constrained voice and her gradual acquisition of agency can be interpreted as both personal growth and as an allegory for the emancipation of individuals and communities under oppressive structures. Similarly, Beatrice's resilience and subtle resistance reveal the strategies women employ to negotiate patriarchal and colonial legacies within private spaces. Applying this dual lens allows for an analysis of how domestic oppression, cultural norms, and postcolonial hierarchies converge to shape identity, agency, and resistance, underscoring the interdependence of gendered and sociopolitical power in Adichie's narrative.

The concept of mind style and narrative perspective, as explored in literary psychology, aligns with feminist and postcolonial approaches to *Purple Hibiscus*. Suleiman, MuniruOladayo, and Ibrahim (2023) argue that Kambili's linguistic choices, silence, and inner reflections reflect her internalisation of patriarchal and colonial authority. Feminist postcolonial theory situates these internalised behaviours within larger social and historical contexts, revealing how oppressive power operates at both structural and psychological levels. The novel's first-person perspective allows readers to experience the constraints of gendered oppression and ideological domination, illustrating the subtle ways in which authority is internalized. By analysing mind style through this framework, one can interpret Kambili's evolving voice as emblematic of both individual psychological development and broader postcolonial emancipation, reinforcing the allegorical dimensions of the text.

Another important theoretical consideration is masculinity and patriarchal power, which is central to the novel's allegorical critique. Van Klinken (2024) examines how even seemingly benevolent male figures, such as Father Amadi, remain constrained by societal and cultural expectations of masculinity, demonstrating that resistance to oppression requires not only female agency but also reimagining male roles. Feminist postcolonial theory emphasises that patriarchal power is intertwined with cultural, religious, and historical forces, meaning that individual behavior cannot be separated from systemic structures. Eugene Achike's authoritarianism thus represents both personal brutality and the broader operation of

postcolonial, patriarchal authority. Understanding these dynamics through this theoretical lens reveals how gender, power, and history converge in shaping identities, relationships, and allegorical meaning in *Purple Hibiscus*.

Finally, symbolism and cultural hybridity in *Purple Hibiscus* are analysed effectively through a feminist postcolonial framework. The purple hibiscus itself serves as a metaphor for liberation, resistance, and transformation, symbolising the potential for agency within restrictive structures (Nwankwo, 2018; Ahire, 2025). Feminist postcolonial theory allows readers to interpret this symbol in relation to both gendered and cultural dimensions: it represents the breaking of patriarchal and colonial constraints while also highlighting the negotiation of hybrid identities in postcolonial Nigeria. The contrasting domestic spaces, religious practices, and educational opportunities depicted in the novel are allegorical sites where power, resistance, and identity are contested. This framework, therefore, provides a comprehensive lens to analyse how Adichie constructs a narrative that critiques oppression, celebrates agency, and explores the complex intersections of gender, culture, and postcolonial legacy.

Feminist and Postcolonial Perspectives in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

The Achike household functions as a microcosm of authoritarian control, where Eugene Achike's violent dominance mirrors societal hierarchies in postcolonial Nigeria (Stobie, 2010). His rigid adherence to Catholic dogma extends beyond religious devotion, enforcing absolute control over Kambili and Beatrice. Physical abuse, emotional intimidation, and enforced silence illustrate how patriarchal and authoritarian authority operates simultaneously at personal and structural levels. Kambili's compliance and internalised fear exemplify the normalisation of oppression within domestic spaces. Through this allegorical portrayal, Adichie critiques both familial and national power structures, emphasizing the interconnectedness of private violence and public tyranny. The home becomes a symbolic stage reflecting the broader societal consequences of entrenched patriarchal and political authority.

Kambili's narrative voice reveals her internalisation of patriarchal and religious authority. Her fragmented thoughts, hesitant speech, and constrained expression represent the psychological mechanisms of domination (Suleiman et al., 2023). The novel uses Kambili's perspective to immerse the reader in the experience of silenced subjectivity, making visible

the subtle, pervasive effects of patriarchal power. Her eventual ability to speak, act, and express emotion symbolises both personal and collective liberation. Feminist postcolonial theory frames Kambili's transformation as emblematic of resistance to both gendered oppression and colonial legacies embedded in ideology and education. Adichie highlights how liberation involves not only structural changes but also the reclamation of individual consciousness and agency within oppressive systems.

Eugene's authority embodies patriarchal power, illustrating how masculinity is socially and culturally constructed (Van Klinken, 2024). His violent enforcement of norms contrasts with the more subtle gendered control exercised over Beatrice, whose compliance reinforces systemic oppression. Feminist theory emphasises that these dynamics are not merely personal but institutional, reflecting the interplay of family, culture, and colonial inheritance. The novel's allegorical structure suggests that patriarchal authority in domestic spaces mirrors societal hierarchies, where men wield power through social, religious, and economic control. By exposing these dynamics, Adichie critiques the normalization of male dominance and demonstrates the necessity of reimagining masculinity to achieve societal transformation.

Eugene's strict Catholicism reflects the internalisation of colonial ideologies, revealing the lingering influence of European missionary practices (Wallace, 2012). Religious dogma is used as a tool for both moral instruction and coercion, illustrating the convergence of spiritual and political authority. The Achike household embodies a postcolonial allegory wherein inherited colonial structures continue to shape behavior, identity, and domestic hierarchies. Contrastingly, Ifeoma's flexible approach to religion suggests a synthesis of indigenous and Western values, highlighting moderation and critical engagement as tools of resistance (Nwankwo, 2018). Through this symbolic juxtaposition, the novel critiques colonial legacies while promoting cultural hybridity and adaptive strategies for negotiating power in postcolonial contexts.

Ifeoma's household serves as a space of intellectual freedom, emotional openness, and egalitarian relationships (Ahire, 2025). Its contrast with the Achike home underscores the novel's allegorical tension between oppression and liberation. By exposing Kambili to conversation, debate, and laughter, Ifeoma cultivates psychological and cultural emancipation. This domestic space represents postcolonial possibility, where individuals can negotiate identity, question authority, and resist patriarchal and colonial structures. The

narrative suggests that alternative models of governance, dialogue, and family organization are essential for challenging oppressive norms. Ifeoma's home embodies resilience and agency, symbolizing the capacity for transformation through education, critical thought, and egalitarian relationships.

Adichie explores the negotiation between Western and African values through contrasting domestic spaces and educational practices (Karthiga et al., 2022). The Achike household's rigid Western-influenced norms clash with Ifeoma's hybridized approach, demonstrating the tension inherent in postcolonial identity formation. Characters navigate these cultural binaries, reflecting the challenges of reconciling colonial inheritance with indigenous practices. The novel allegorises broader societal negotiation, emphasising that cultural adaptability and critical reflection are essential for postcolonial liberation. Through Kambili's exposure to alternative models, the narrative reveals that personal transformation is inseparable from cultural and political awareness, highlighting how domestic experiences mirror national struggles over identity, authority, and autonomy.

The purple hibiscus is a recurring symbol of liberation, individuality, and hope (Nwankwo, 2018). Its rarity and unusual colour represent deviation from imposed norms and the possibility of self-determination. In Ifeoma's garden, it flourishes as an emblem of resistance to authoritarian control, patriarchal dominance, and colonial influence. The flower's symbolism extends to Kambili's personal development, marking her gradual emergence from silence and compliance to agency and self-expression. Adichie employs this motif to suggest that freedom—personal, cultural, and political—is attainable through courage, resilience, and the nurturing of alternative perspectives. The purple hibiscus thus functions as a potent allegorical device linking domestic, gendered, and national liberation.

Education operates as both a symbol and tool of resistance in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili's exposure to Ifeoma's pedagogical practices illustrates the transformative potential of knowledge and dialogue (Ahire, 2025). Unlike Eugene's rigid, dogmatic expectations, Ifeoma encourages critical thinking and creativity, enabling Kambili to question authority and cultural norms. Education is portrayed as a mechanism for self-liberation and cultural negotiation, reinforcing postcolonial ideals of agency and empowerment. Feminist theory frames this intellectual awakening as central to women's emancipation, highlighting how access to knowledge allows the subjugated to envision alternatives to patriarchal and colonial

structures. The allegorical significance emphasizes that freedom is inseparable from the capacity for critical thought and self-reflection.

Beatrice Achike represents subtle but profound resistance within oppressive structures. Her compliance masks quiet strategies to protect her children, and her eventual confrontation with Eugene symbolises the assertion of agency (Suleiman et al., 2023). Feminist theory emphasises that such acts of resistance are critical in contexts where overt rebellion is dangerous. Postcolonial allegory situates Beatrice's actions within broader societal patterns, suggesting that women negotiate oppression strategically to survive and foster future transformation. The novel portrays female resilience as essential to dismantling patriarchal power, illustrating that liberation is a collective and intergenerational process, encompassing both domestic and societal spheres.

Adichie interrogates the concept of "redemptive masculinity" through characters such as Father Amadi, whose gentler demeanor contrasts with Eugene's brutality (Van Klinken, 2024). While these male figures offer alternative models of power, they remain shaped by patriarchal and cultural expectations. Feminist postcolonial analysis highlights that reimagining masculinity is necessary for dismantling oppressive structures. The narrative critiques reliance on benevolent patriarchy, emphasizing that genuine liberation requires structural, cultural, and psychological transformation. By portraying both oppressive and non-oppressive masculinities, Adichie underscores the complexities of gendered authority and the importance of redefining male roles within postcolonial, familial, and societal contexts.

The novel illustrates how religion, gender, and power intersect to maintain hierarchies within the family and society. Eugene's authority is both spiritual and patriarchal, reinforcing systemic oppression while exploiting religious morality to legitimise violence (Wallace, 2012). Kambili and Beatrice's experiences demonstrate that oppression is not unidimensional; it operates through multiple, interconnected structures. Feminist postcolonial theory provides insight into how domestic spaces allegorically reflect societal hierarchies, revealing that gendered, religious, and colonial legacies shape both individual behavior and collective identity. Adichie highlights the necessity of recognising these intersections to understand the mechanisms of power, resistance, and transformation within postcolonial societies.

Ultimately, *Purple Hibiscus* constructs an allegorical narrative linking personal emancipation with postcolonial liberation. Kambili's growth, Beatrice's subtle resistance, and the symbolic motifs of flowers, education, and domestic spaces collectively represent the possibility of societal transformation (Nwankwo, 2018; Ahire, 2025). The Achike and Ifeoma households embody contrasting ideologies, demonstrating how negotiation, critical thought, and courage enable resistance to patriarchal and colonial legacies. Adichie's allegory emphasizes that liberation is multidimensional—encompassing psychological, gendered, cultural, and political domains. The novel illustrates that personal agency, when coupled with social and cultural awareness, can catalyze broader societal change, reinforcing the importance of feminist and postcolonial perspectives in understanding oppression and the pathways to freedom.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* operates as a complex allegory that interweaves domestic, cultural, and national critique. Through the Achike household, the novel exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal and authoritarian control, illustrating how domestic tyranny mirrors societal hierarchies and postcolonial power structures (Stobie, 2010; Wallace, 2012). Kambili's constrained voice and psychological oppression reflect the subtle internalisation of patriarchal authority, while Beatrice's resilience and eventual assertion of agency highlight the strategies women employ to resist systemic oppression (Suleiman et al., 2023). In contrast, Aunt Ifeoma's household embodies freedom, dialogue, and intellectual engagement, serving as an allegorical space of resistance and cultural negotiation (Ahire, 2025; Karthiga et al., 2022).

The novel's symbolic motifs, particularly the purple hibiscus, reinforce themes of transformation, hope, and liberation, linking personal emancipation with broader societal possibilities (Nwankwo, 2018). By integrating feminist and postcolonial perspectives, this study demonstrates how Adichie critiques the intersections of gender, religion, and colonial legacies, while foregrounding the potential for resistance, dialogue, and hybridized identity. Ultimately, *Purple Hibiscus* affirms that liberation—both personal and societal—requires courage, critical reflection, and the reimagining of entrenched structures of power, making the novel a profound commentary on postcolonial Nigeria and the human struggle for autonomy and self-determination.

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