

EFFECTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ON WOMEN AND CHILDREN: A STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, writers have explored many issues that affect the African society. Currently, the wide spread of domestic violence as a social problem, has awakened the interest of African writers as a result of its negative consequences. Women and children have been marginalized, stereotyped and humiliated in different ways. All these have negative impact on them; hence complications resulting from violence lead to depression, pains, physical disability, mental instability and lastly, death. This paper investigates the negative effects of domestic violence on women and children in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in order to expose the negative impact of these acts on women and children. The selected text is investigated to explore the stereotype or discriminations which could be stopped through proper understanding of the damages and dangers posed by these subduing acts. This study educates the masses on different faces of domestic violence, their causes and effects. The paper adopts feminism as a theory in analyzing the texts; it therefore concludes that domestic violence has become the order of the day in different societies today despite the assertion of individual human rights. Hence, African writers have dedicated their literary energy in exposing this social problem.

INTRODUCTION

African literature has succeeded in documenting various social issues that affect the living conditions of people in Africa. The African societies have witnessed an upsurge in literature triggered by the feminist movement. Hence, many writers have dedicated their literary energy to pleading the case of the African woman and children, especially the female gender. Currently, attention is paid to the wide spread problem of domestic violence in most African countries. Cases of women and children abuse and eventual femicide are rampant in every society. Many literary artists have written to document the existence of such violent acts as a social problem which is gradually destroying vulnerable individuals in society. Analysis of the problem of domestic violence is very recent in Africa, than in other parts of the world. Thus, most of the writings about it have been explored by activists rather than academics. However, writers have dedicated their literary energy in documenting this issue.

Most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization and abuse of women. In this context, female characters are marginalized, suppressed, humiliated and stereotyped; only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonists. In essence, the ideal female character created by male writers works within the framework of her traditional roles as a wife and mother. These constructed roles are accepted social values which the female gender must aptly

adapt to in order to earn respect and love from her husband. Many of the works written by male writers showcased different phases of domestic violence which manifested in form of male ego supported by patriarchal settings as seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe's representation of the satirical portraits of Okonkwo and his wives, the shouting, beatings and physical threats are evidence that domestic violence has been in existence before colonialism in Nigeria and Africa at large. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* gives a pre-colonial account of the status of women at that time. Through the pictures painted about Okonkwo's wives, it is understood that in pre-colonial Igbo society, women's lives revolved around farming, bearing children, caring for their husbands and household chores. Women are victims of coercion especially in marriage; Okonkwo's wife was battered, humiliated and her voice was silenced by her husband's masculine supremacy. This explains the fact that women are also beaten and reprimanded like children. Uzodimma Nwala thus observes that "generally the rest of the women are classified along with children as infants" (49). Traditional philosophy and culture also contribute in encouraging the plights of women and children in society. He further explains that the Igbo thought patterns and traditions do not recognize womanhood which is the gateway to the existence of the continuity of these traditions. In most African family circles, when a woman is maltreated and humiliated; it becomes a family matter until the victim is dead or sustains a life threatening injury. When such brutality is reported to the police, the woman's in-laws often show resentment and bitter hatred; as such, the woman is stereotyped and branded a wicked person for reporting her husband's inhuman behaviour. This thus makes it difficult to tackle the issue of domestic violence; hence, efforts to eradicate this problem seem futile as people's imagination and cultural beliefs hinder the hands of the law from operating. Women and children bear this huge cross and wait patiently for a day of liberation which looms with uncertainties until they either get killed, deformed or get their husbands/ fathers killed.

In order to fully explore the concept of domestic violence in African fiction, an attempt must be made in defining it. The term, 'domestic' is defined by the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 7th Edition* as "anything or anyone connected with the home or family" (434). The word, 'violence' is also defined by the above mentioned dictionary as a "physical or emotional force and energy or a violent behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody" (1642). Violence has been in existence since the creation of mankind; hence, man has been violent towards one another. Violence is experienced in diverse ways ranging from physical to mental abuses. The word 'violence' when gendered often view men as the people who carryout harmful behaviour towards women (sexual harassment, rape, brutality (domestic violence) and intimidation); but the fact remains that violence also denotes a word used in the subordination of women by men. This paper thus discusses the problem of domestic violence which has negatively affected relationships in society. Domestic violence can affect any person in society, but most times, women and children fall victim to it as a result of the social structures existing in a given society. The fact remains that violence against women and children are rampant and often results in sufferings, physical, sexual and mental harm which endanger their existence. Hence, with the above mentioned facts, the effects of domestic violence are undoubtedly negative. Women have been battered, intimidated and sexually abused by their male partners or husbands. In the same vein, children have been physically, sexually and mentally abused by their families, fathers as well as their mothers. It is also important to note that from the family circle to the public sphere, women and children

(especially the girl children) have suffered much hardship and have been greatly dehumanized. Hence, these acts subdue and deprive them of their freedom and happiness.

Women and children have been marginalized, stereotyped and humiliated in different ways in societies. All these have negative impact on them; hence complications resulting from domestic violence often lead to lifelong disability, trauma, emotional pain or psychological disorder. This paper explores and investigates the effects of domestic violence in the selected novel, *Purple Hibiscus* in order to expose the challenges and negative impacts of domestic violence on women and children.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*: CAUSES, EFFECTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Women and children suffer physical, emotional and psychological injuries at the hands of a violent partner, companion, husband and father. However, the psychological and emotional effects of domestic violence have enormous consequences which could be very destructive. The degradation and humiliation of women could be traced back to the pre-colonial times. Women suffered violence and were regarded as property owned and managed by men and society in general which also supported a patriarchal cultural milieu. However, marriage provided a firm ground for the manipulation, humiliation and violation of women's freedom and self worth. Thus, women perpetually remain slaves to husbands who do not consider their feelings or opinions in matters concerning them. Imbua observes that:

...there are several forms of servile marriage in serving instances when a woman, without the right to refuse is promised or given in marriage on payment in money or in kind to her parents or guardian. In most servile form of marriage, the husband perceives the wife as a property over whose productive and reproductive powers he exercises absolute control. (14)

The above quotation gives an insight to the plight of women in the union called 'marriage'. This male figure dominance often times leads to violence of different forms which often affects both the women and children. Hamilton further explains that "the spiritual authority of the husband had a necessary corollary: the inferiority of his wife. This inferiority stemmed from two sources: first the nature of women suited them to a life of submission, second her inferiority was inherent in her role as a help mate...The man was not created for the woman but the woman for the man"(68). It thus becomes clear that women struggle with the problem of domestic violence which hinders their efforts in finding a place and identity in society.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist in writing the novel, *Purple Hibiscus* exposes and explores the problems and effects of domestic violence on women and children. Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* is a well crafted, engaging and interesting piece of work. *Purple Hibiscus* is a complex novel. The novel is presented to the readers using the first-person narrative in order to explore the narrator's experiences; a young girl who finds courage and a new voice, despite years of abuse and intimidation which left her world shattering. The novel is set in the eastern region of Nigeria; precisely, the Igbo communities of Enugu, Nsukka and Abba. Adichie

as an Igbo is familiar with her physical environment which she intricately describes in order to depict the rich traditional values of the Igbo society. In order to fully explore the problem of domestic violence, the novelist presents the readers with two different women (Ifeoma and Beatrice) with different marital experiences. The story is told through the eyes of the fifteen-year-old Kambili and her seventeen-year-old brother, Jaja. Kambili and Jaja are Eugene and Beatrice Achike's children. Eugene Achike commonly called papa is a rich devout catholic convert and a religious fanatic. Eugene's religious fanaticism and overbearing attitude contribute in imprisoning and incapacitating those whom he professes to cherish, love, protect and teach morals. His fanaticism however becomes a propellant to his violent and domineering behaviour that tormented his wife and children; he thus metes out severe punishments for minor transgressions, hence, inflicting physical and emotional scars on them. Eugene's overbearing attitude encourages his wife and children's withdrawn, shy and gloomy attitude. The consequence of Eugene's brutal treatment leads to his wife's miscarriages, injuries, scars and emotional pains.

In narrating the story of Kambili, Jaja, Beatrice, and the extraordinary events that affected their lives, Adichie presents and explores a number of important issues rather intricately. Her characters are very complex and credible in nature. On the question of domestic abuse, for instance, Eugene is seen by people as a religious, generous, loving and compassionate person; thus, he receives many recognition from people as well as other organizations. His family however has a contrary view; ironically, as his victims, they are surprised by his dual personality and good will towards people.

To friends and relatives, Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja are living a good life free from stress and poverty. However, behind the enviable walls of their house, provided by their benevolent businessman, father, and husband, Eugene Achike, life is difficult and less enjoyable. Their lives revolve around routine timetable which controls their activities and lives, and finally subdues them. The pressures and emotional torture at home have tremendous impact on the children who also deal with the social and emotional ups and downs of adolescence, peer relations, and petty rivalries in society. The novel takes a different turn when Eugene's widowed sister (Ifeoma) invites the children to spend time with her family at Nsukka. The visit to Aunty Ifeoma's home begins a series of life-changing experiences with far-reaching consequences which changed Achike's family forever. At their aunt's home, Kambili and her brother (Jaja) discover a life full of love, freedom, and free from any form of brutality and psychological pains. The visit helps them realize their self worth and capabilities; at the same time it exposes the fact that children grow well mentally and physically in a home filled with love and understanding. Such was the case of aunty Ifeoma and her children (Chima, Amaka and Obiora). Hence, the possibility of having a family where members are allowed to express their views encouraged Jaja to challenge his father when he refuses to receive communion on a Palm Sunday against his father's directive. Jaja's action causes a major conflict in the family; in the end, the most decisive actions come from the least expected sources. The children's aggressive nature emanates as a result of their father's overbearing attitude and constant molestation. On the other hand, Eugene's wife, Beatrice is not able to cope with the beatings, mental/(psychological pains) and humiliation meted on her by her husband; she poisons her husband and chooses to accept what fate brings. Jaja takes blame for his father's death and is imprisoned. Beatrice's mental condition deteriorates and she is taken care of by Kambili, her eighteen year old daughter who has become independent and confident.

Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili are all victims of domestic violence. Battery and physical abuse have become part of the Achike's family experiences. Beatrice Achike is a quiet, responsible and obedient wife who was battered, molested, dehumanized and punished by her husband. Eugene treats his wife like a slave and subjugates her to beating in order to enforce obedience in their relationship. This comes in disguise of religious rules that leave his family without an alternative to live a liberal life. When Beatrice or his children fail to adhere to his instructions, he resorts to violence to instill obedience and fear in them. Thus, the fear of Eugene Achike becomes a night mare to his family. During one of their visits to father Benedict after a church service, Beatrice who is also called Mama opts to stay in the car as a result of her poor health. Her request is turned down with a threatening question that forced her on her feet. "Are you sure you want to stay in the car? Papa asked. My body does not feel right" "she mumbled. I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car" (37)? Eugene's stare threatens Beatrice to join them against her will in order to avoid the huge consequences of expressing her opinions. Beatrice's total obedience in visiting father Benedict did not stop her husband's brutality against her expressed opinion. At home, he beats and leaves her with pains and bruises all over her body. Kambili narrates:

When I heard the sound, swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand carved bedroom...counting made it seem not that bad. Sometimes, it was over before I even got to twenty. I was in nineteen when the sounds stopped. I heard the door open...mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory worker bought in bulk at the same border...we cleaned up the trickle of blood which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red water colour all the way down stairs. (41)

Jaja and Kambili are not left out in their father's brutality; when Jaja declines to take Holy Communion on Palm Sunday for personal reasons, he later receives his father's punishment. Jaja confesses his reason for declining: "The wafer gives me bad breathe...And the priest keeps touching my and it nauseates me" (14). In reaction to Jaja's decision, Eugene, "picked up the missal and flung it across the room, toward Jaja" (15). The children suffered many physical threats and abuses in the hands of their father. During one of their visits to the village, the children were punished for staying and exchanging pleasantries with their grandfather whom Eugene regards as a heathen. He poured hot boiling water on his children's feet as a punishment for staying with his own father who is not a Christian. He also brutally beats up Kambili until she collapsed because she was against her father's destruction of the last memory of her grandfather which was in her possession. The kick Kambili got from her father resulted to an injury in her ribs which caused great pain in breathing. This also got her admitted in the hospital; Kambili further narrates her ordeal when she came back home later than usual: "Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on my face and ringing in my ears for days"(59). At ten, Jaja's finger was broken by his father because he missed two questions on his catechism test and thus did not emerge as the best candidate. The broken finger is described as a "gnarled finger deformed like a dried stick" (153).

The fact remains that domestic violence consists of aggressive and excessive victimization or brutality which leaves physical bruises as well as psychological ones. The members of Achike's

family were imprisoned in an environment with high walls, giant trees and finally, Eugene's authoritarian decision. They were not allowed to express themselves; as a result, they became withdrawn, timid and confused. This however affected their relationship in society since they were commonly seen as snobs by other people (See page 60). Most of the people who are violent at home are sometimes the victims of domestic violence. A major factor which contributed to Eugene's attitude could be traced to his past experiences; he narrates his experience with a priest at St Gregory, according to him, "he asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it... The good father did that for my own good" (203). The above quotation is an evidence that Eugene Achike was a victim of violent acts which have psychologically affected his pattern of thinking and behaviour. He resorts to using violent means in punishing his family over minor offenses.

The three members of Achike's family (Beatrice, Kambili, Jaja) suffered physical and mental abuse at the hand of their father which has huge negative effects and consequences such as injuries, bruises, deformities, miscarriages and loss of breath or memory. Beatrice who is also called 'Mama' experienced a lot of violent acts in the hands of Eugene. She lost many pregnancies as a result of her husband's constant molestation and battery. Through her narration, the reader understands the seriousness of her husband's violent behaviour which nearly killed her. Beatrice confesses: "you know that 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" (253). Beatrice and her children suffered great pain and injuries due to Eugene Achike's inhuman behaviour. Mama (Beatrice) also suffered severe injuries which affected the eyes and the face. Kambili describes the injury in the eyes as "the black purple colour of an overripe avocado" (19). The scar on the face she describes as "a jagged scar on her forehead" (23). These deformities, emotional and psychological stress affected the Achike's family negatively and later pushed them into doing the unimaginable. Beatrice experienced a physical and mental stress during the period she was humiliated and battered by her husband; this later led to depression and the eventual killing of her husband, Eugene Achike. After the death of her husband, her mental state deteriorated, she confessed to people that she killed her husband by adding poison in his tea. According to the narrator:

She does not mind that she looks this way; she doesn't even seem to know. She has been different ever since Jaja was locked up (300)... She is looking straight ahead at the front seat; I doubt that she can hear anything. Most times, her answers are nods and shakes of the head, and I wonder if she really heard. I used to ask Sisi to talk to her, because she would sit in the living room for long hours but she said mama would not reply to her, that mama simply sat and stared. (301-302)

The above quotation is an indication that people who are abused usually suffer from anxiety, insomnia, depression, and fear or memory loss. Such was the condition of Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili who suffocated and almost lost their lives as a result of Eugene's brutality. Kambili recounts her worst experience after witnessing Eugene's brutality; "I went upstairs and sat staring at my textbook. The black type blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood. The blood was watery, flowing from mama, flowing from

my eyes” (43). All these are the negative effects of domestic violence which often times lead to physical/ mental illness or eventual death. The above experiences call for the need to re-examine the consequences of domestic violence to victims and society at large. The fact remains that domestic violence is dangerous as a result of its long time negative effects on the victims even after being separated from the experience.

CONCLUSION

Domestic violence has negative implications in the family and society at large. Thus strategies or measures must be employed in order to address the problem, especially if it involves an aspect of gender struggle and equality. There are different forms of domestic violence which center on some sociological forces or factors resulting from male aggression/ego, poverty or traditional/cultural violence. Therefore, there is need for social action in order to confront the problem of domestic violence. Domestic violence is a manifestation of a much larger phenomenon of gender inequality and violent treatment of women and children. Hence, legal reforms and laws must be established as effective remedies in order to curb violent treatments against women and children. The government needs to provide necessary measures in helping the victims of domestic violence by providing rehabilitation centers and skill acquisition programmes in order to help improve their lives. The government should also make laws that would punish people who are guilty of the act of violence. In essence, education and public awareness should be encouraged in order to enlighten the general public on the consequences of domestic violence which is a huge loss to human relationship.

Feminist are relevant in exploring the problem of domestic violence in African literature. Indeed, it is difficult to explore domestic violence in African literature without dealing with the problem of gender inequality. Most traditional African societies are patriarchal and the women’s roles are highly subordinate and redundant. Thus, African customary laws have traditionally institutionalized inequalities which limit women’s opinions and freedom in marriage. This goes a long way in destroying relationships in families and society since the most vulnerable in society such as women and children are dehumanized, brutalized and killed.

The conclusion is that unless the problem of inequality between men and women is addressed, domestic violence would continue unabated. Hence, the documentation of these inhuman experiences by literary artists is a good step in dealing with this devastating problem which is negatively crippling relationships in society. The major factor that contributes to domestic violence is attributed to the subordinate position of women to men, and the economic dependence of women in society. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice was totally dependent on her rich business minded husband (Eugene Achike) who manipulated her decisions as well as her emotions. This manipulation also extends to her children (Jaja and Kambili) who lived perpetually in fear and hatred as a result of their father’s behaviour. To other people in society, Eugene is a good and wealthy, devoted catholic who cherishes his family and helps the needy. The consequence of this is that, Beatrice hated her husband and later poisoned him in order to escape from her suffocating experiences. The traditional society does not help in curbing the problem of domestic violence or the suppressing social order which classifies women and children as the most vulnerable, incapable of taking

decisions in society. Hence, they depend on men (husbands and fathers) for support and decisions over matters that affect their lives. In the novel, Beatrice's and her children's decisions were controlled by Eugene who forced his family to conform to his expected behaviour by yielding to his rules and decisions. In this way, domestic violence functioned as a quick means of enforcing conformity /obedience. This however causes both physical and mental stress to his wife and children; Beatrice's mental illness worsened after the death of her husband. Though, she is free from her husband's daily torture; she is deeply entangled in the web of her crime. Her son, Jaja confesses to the crime he did not commit in order to protect her mother, but Beatrice's painful experiences plunged her into a world of psychological torture.

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