

FEMINISM AS A PREREQUISITE OF HEALTHY FAMILIES: AN ANALYTICAL DISSECTION OF ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS AND WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS

Vishnu Priya. S ^{1*}, Dr Gopika Raja ²

¹ Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India. vishnupriyarakku20@gmail.com

² Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

Abstract

Feminism is always a cornerstone of a healthy society. The world has evolved a lot from sexism. Feminism is not merely a necessity for a good social set up, but is a prerequisite of a healthy and safe family. This article titled "Feminism; as a Prerequisite of Healthy families: An Analytical dissection of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *We Should All Be Feminists*" explores the relevance of feminism in developing functional and safe family bonds.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, equality, family, trauma.

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." [Tolstoy,1]

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* penned by the Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie clearly illustrates this dynamics in familial relationships. The novel is her debut work and through the character of Kambili Achike, Adichie comments on religious hypocrisy, political and social turmoil in Nigeria etc. The novel particularly throws light on trauma, toxic patriarchy as well as the dire need of feminism for the functioning of a healthy safe kinship relations.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian feminist novelist. She advocates for the freedom and equality and upholds the adage, "The personal is political". This adage was used as a political statement during the second wave of feminism. It actually challenged the nuclear family system as well as family values. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* confers to this statement. Though it says the story of a family, on a wider lens the novel depicts much more. Similarly, in her essay *We Should All Be Feminists* through the various incidents she knew, she draws a big picture to illustrate why we should all be feminists actually. Two families, one of Eugene, wife and children, and the other one of Auntie Ifeoma and children stands in deep contrast all through the novel. When both these families overlap during a family gathering, Eugene's children, particularly the protagonist of the novel Kambili, realise how unhealthy her family is. Through the family of Auntie Ifeoma, Adichie portrays her idea of a healthy and safe family where freedom, joy, and community prevails and where growth and evolving are welcomed.

Kambili's family, appears to be a settled, happy family, but within the family they are suffocating. Papa (Eugene), who is a respected and dignified man in public, is a fanatic at home. The family lives in silence and fear. Her father reacts through sporadic violence for anything he considers disobedient. Kambili, Jaja and Mama are oppressed in the house. A well praised and received aspect of *Purple Hibiscus* is Adichie's ability to write from the perspective of a child. All sentences are short, blunt and to the point, while words are kept to basic level. Thus, the reader could easily dwell into the mindscape of a young girl and relate completely to the misfortunes. They are all

traumatized. In the novel, Eugene fits the descriptions of a Gothic patriarch and Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja are the suffering subjects of his authority. Eugene beats them, whips them and pours boiling water on them. Mama is beaten brutally several times which leads to multiple miscarriages. The children Kambili and Jaja gets their first taste of freedom when they visit Auntie Ifeoma. In her family, children are encouraged to speak, decide and question. This exposure to a healthy family instills in them a deep need for protest and rebellion towards their father's tyranny. Adichie shows how violence almost always begets more violence, both as a method of oppression as well as a struggle for freedom.

While Papa acted as a tyrant and oppressed the entire family through violent abuse, the family on the other hand finally chose violence and rebellion as their means of escape. Kambili asserts her freedom by keeping her grandfather's painting neglecting Papa's dislike for the same. Juju uses his long taught silence [which is no longer fearful] as his rebellion towards Papa. He who was silenced all these while used the same silence as his weapon. Finally, Mama chooses to murder Papa as her only resort towards being safe and independent.

This relational dynamics Adichie portrays in *Purple Hibiscus* is the fictional version of her personal, eloquently argued essay *We Should All Be Feminists*. This essay is a powerful statement of feminism and discusses all the related aspects in a realistic and relatable way. The reader finds it easier to connect and gets a gist of why feminism is pertinent in today's world. Adichie, in the essay describes herself as a 'Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men And Who Likes To Wear Lip Gloss And High Heels For Herself And Not For Men'. (10) She explains in her essay, "When women say 'I did it for peace in my marriage,' it is usually because they have given up a job, career goal, a dream. We teach females that in relationships, compromise is what a woman is more likely to do." (31) In the novel, Mama compromises her health, freedom, her voice and every basic rights and lives as a slave to her tyrant husband. She suffers several miscarriages due to Papa's abuse but she is grateful that he stayed and didn't choose another woman. Kambili also idolizes her father. She even resents comparing him to another

man. “God is faithful. You know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our umunna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. But your father stayed with me, with us.” (20)

The novel explores numerous societal structures through which women are oppressed. She identifies domestic violence, religion, traditions, family life complacency as being equally responsible. Adichie shares a similar instance in her essay, “I know a woman who has the same degree and same job as her husband. When they get back from work, she does most of the housework, which is true for many marriages, but what struck me was that whenever he changed the baby’s nappy, she said *thank you* to him. What if she saw it as something normal and natural, that he should help care for his kid?” (37). Similarly Mama here cannot interpret loyalty as something basic in a relationship. This shows how women are conditioned to behave submissively to the whims and fancies of an authoritative partner. Women are raised ‘inherently guilty’ (33). Similarly, Adichie portrays a stark irony.

Papa bravely stands up for political freedom, he represents the power of free speech through his newspaper. Meanwhile, in the world of his family, he is a tyrant. He silences the entire family. When someone in the family makes the slightest attempt to assert freedom, he responds with violence and savagery. This irony clearly asserts what Adichie said in her essay when someone asked her “Why the word *feminist*? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?” She says, “It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women.” (41)

Adichie draws similar parallels between her novel and personal essay. Towards the end of the novel, where Mama confesses that she poisoned Papa, Kambili says that “I thought of taking sips of Papa’s tea, love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his love onto my tongue”. (290) This again shows how Kambili thinks he is god-like, even though he is more of a terrifying master than a good father. This reveals the trauma bonding that exist between Kambili and her father. Every time Kambili is brutally punished by Papa, she internalize it as love. She feels guilty and ashamed for not meeting Papa’s expectations. She feels a sense of obligation towards him. Since she was brought up such a way, it took a long time for her to unlearn all these and relearn healthy relationships. She says, “I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die.” “He had seemed immortal” (287) Mama doesn’t answer Kambili and Jaja anymore. She has put an end to her life of servitude and asserts her freedom. This, Adichie, exhorts through her definition of feminism, “Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must do better.” (48) She fixed her plight through killing her abuser. Adichie crafted the character of Eugene to exemplify every man who acts toxically patriarchal in his household and as a liberal in social circles. The writer finds the murder of Eugene by Mama as the declaration of her freedom. As stated earlier, Adichie’s novel and its characters are a pronouncement of why she preaches that we should all be feminists.

The author reflects on the various manifestations of trauma on the lives of both Kambili and Jaja. Both these children stand as clear examples of how different individuals manage their traumatic stress. Trauma has multiple aspects. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, Text Revision (DSMIV-TR; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) describes trauma as:

“Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one’s physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person; or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person’s response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behavior) “(Criterion A2). (p. 463).

This definition resonates with the damage caused to Mama, Kambili and Jaja by Papa. Adichie opens the novel with Jaja’s rebellion towards his Papa. The family is very religious and is too familiar with domestic violence. Jaja who is usually silent and obedient begins using his silence as a weapon against Papa. This seems like him robbing Papa of some of his power. He says, “Mba, there are no words in my mouth” (8). To this, Kambili feels “There was a shadow clouding Papa’s eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja’s eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja’s eyes and entered Papa’s.” (13) Papa had a say in the children’s daily routine, their religious inclination and their choice of language as well. He created a routine for them, time to eat; pray; sleep etc. He even chose the colour of their drapes. In the novel, Kambili says, “We had to sound civilised in public, he told us; we had to speak English” (13). Also, “He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially with the white religious.” (46) All these throws light to his respect for the West. While the whole of Nigeria fought for freedom and independence from the West, he is ready to accept the so-called superior status of the West. This sort of contradictions in political ideology, reflects in his personal life too. He is a devout Christian but even in religion he is ready to consider white religious as far more superior.

Similarly, in another instance Kambili says, “We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn’t” (226). Here she observes the difference in upbringing of both her family and Auntie Ifeoma’s family. She realizes how praise, support and encouragement work better than punishment and silencing. When Mama has a miscarriage, Adichie portrays how it affected Kambili. She would sit to study and all the letters blur and she feels like seeing blood in the book. All these incidents show how traumatized these children grew up in the household. Both Jaja and Kambili, when exposed to a healthy world out of their family, realized about the shortcomings of their upbringing. They make attempts to outgrow their condition, each one of them, in a unique way. The novel’s optimistic ending takes the personal story of the Eugene family as a metaphor of the freedom struggle of Nigeria. Just like Mama, Kambili and Jaja outgrew Eugene, Nigeria would also outgrow its colonizers.

Mama in the novel depicts an African woman who is forced to remain dumb to all abuse and mistreatment from her partner. By remaining silent and submissive, she perceives to be a good woman. On the contrary, Auntie Ifeoma represents a woman who is independent and assertive. While Mama fails to adhere to the qualities of a protective parent, Auntie Ifeoma clearly shows that she is one. She is a widow and raises her children in a progressive way. Whereas Mama has no voice against her husband’s cruel ways of controlling and bullying children. She remains liberal for a major part. Auntie Ifeoma once tells Beatrice, “When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head” (218). Auntie Ifeoma cannot believe that Mama would consider returning to her home after the beating-induced miscarriage. Though Mama does return to Enugu, her

final statement of killing Papa and ending the tyranny forever manifests how radical feminism is relevant to end violence. Auntie Ifeoma is a true radical feminist. She protest against all sorts of injustice even when her life was at risk.

Purple Hibiscus and *We should all be feminists* dwell deep into the plight of womenfolk in dictatorial and autocratic households. She also exposes how poor upbringing derails the personality development and causes deep abandonment issues and difficulty in building healthy relationships. She stresses why radical feminism is necessary for women in such terrible life situations. Adichie crafted her real life encounters with many women and her personal experiences into a thought provoking, poignant story. Larissa MacFarquhar, in *The New Yorker*, describes Adichie as “One of the most vital and original novelists of her generation.” The themes of her novel and the motive makes this statement more effective.

A dominant patriarchal figure like Eugene messed up the entire family dynamics in the novel. He subjugates his wife and assaults her. He controls his children as if he is their master. As it is evident in the novel, he is more of a tyrant dictator than a son, husband and father. He is the product of a society that expects men to be dominating and assertive. But this disrupts the entire family. His wife is having a life of suffering, pain, assault and abuse, solely because of him. The children grew up traumatized and abused which will have a very big role to play in their personality development.

The novel urges the reader to rethink how relevant feministic ideals are in raising a healthy family. If Eugene respected Beatrice in the first place, that would have made the family a happy and safe place. J.K.Rowling once said, “Family is a life jacket in the stormy sea of life.”(108). But, unfortunately for the Eugene family, struggles begin at family.

Eugene’s disrespect for Beatrice and his deleterious ways to the family and his cynical social commitment could be considered as the root cause of their unsuccessful family. Billy Graham rightly said, “When the family is destroyed, society eventually disintegrates.” It is necessary to unlearn, learn and relearn in order to adapt to a better world. A family is basic unit that determines a society. Thus, through the family of Eugene and Beatrice, this article tries to explore the interconnectedness of family dynamics with feminism and trauma studies and also how a healthy family system is rooted on respect, loyalty, equality and freedom within family and not on fake testimonials of social commitment as displayed by Eugene himself.

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