The Wish for Stability

From Alienation to Femininity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus

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Introduction

It could be argued that submission is the ultimate form of freedom. You do not have to make choices and think what it would be like to choose differently. You do not have to feel insecurity, or doubt, about your own choices. You always have someone telling you what to do, and what not to. You may be still, numb but satisfied, with a mind mirroring nothing. How painful it then must be to realise that there is a world of possibilities outside your own and that most people act more or less freely. Having no choice liberates you from regret and reflection, but also from psychological development. What happens to a person who feels nothing and at the same time everything? What happens to a girl who suddenly starts to change and reaches for freedom in a world of oppressive patriarchal thinking?

Kambili, the main character in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus*, is a sensitive, silent and shy fifteen-year-old girl who grows up in Nigeria during the 1990s, a place of political turmoil, coups and instability. She, her brother, and mother are all strictly controlled by the wealthy father and husband Eugene. In public, Eugene is admired for his political struggle, his devotion as a priest, and his economic generosity towards people around him. However, at home, he is a tyrant who abuses his family and controls them minutely – all in the name of God. Suddenly, things change. Eugene’s power slowly decreases and his children find themselves in a positive environment that starts a transformation within them. Both Kambili and Jaja discover a new way of life during their visits to Nsukka, the home-town of Eugene’s sister Ifeoma, a place they visit unaccompanied by their parents. Ifeoma is a free-spirited and generous woman, and she practises a combination of Christianity and traditional Igbo religion, and is thus in stark contrast to Eugene. Kambili laughs, sings and talks, and starts to embrace life.
Many scholars regard Kambili’s journey as a positive example of inner psychological change and growth. In “Dethroning the Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus,” Cheryl Stobie expresses this opinion, and argument from a theological perspective. Stobie connects Kambili’s positive change to a renewed attitude towards religion (430). Ogaga Okuyade does a feminist and psychological reading in “Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus.” According to Okuyade, Kambili experiences inner psychological growth, which is noticeable in the way in which the silence changes. In the beginning it is “empty” and so vast that it seems “magnified” (247, 257). Towards the end, it is a more relaxed and comforting kind of silence: “it is a silence characterized by hope and dreams” (257). In this essay, I will do a different reading. I propose that Kambili’s inner change is of a highly ambiguous character, and only positive or life-affirming on the surface. Underneath, Kambili is still submissive and trapped in a prison of internalised patriarchy, searching for stability and hope.

Kambili’s change is noticeable though, and at the end she has turned from a tense, silent wall of anxiety, into a naïve, dreamy girl. Since her confrontation with and realisation of Eugene as a destructive force never appears to take place, I find it highly appropriate to question her alleged positive ‘change.’ In my opinion, her change romanticises female submission and her unconditional love for an abusive father is perplexing. The love aspect also raises questions concerning ideas of the ‘ultimate female,’ as a hyper-feminine and forgiving creature who avoids confrontation.

This essay will combine a feminist and a postcolonial approach. In Purple Hibiscus, there are several characters who clearly express sexist and patriarchal standpoints, showing a firm belief in this system. For instance, Kambili’s mother Beatrice claims that “[a] husband crowns a woman’s life” (Adichie 75), which reveals a righteous attitude – she defends her
role as the loving and obedient wife in a patriarchal society. Furthermore, my focus will be on the power aspect and consequently, on how Kambili’s dependence on Eugene is a result of her seemingly unconscious acceptance of patriarchy as a system. Moreover, I find it appropriate to combine feminist theory with a postcolonial perspective since questions that concern power structures, victimisation and inequality are prominent in both theories. Since the story of Kambili’s family is firmly intertwined with the turbulent, political situation of the country, the postcolonial aspect is difficult not to consider. I will therefore include ideas about postcolonial, cultural trauma from the introduction of *Splintered Glass: Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond* by Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué. *Splintered Glass* is a collection of essays from 2011 that analyses several literary works from the postcolonial genre with a focus on trauma, and I want to emphasise that I find the introduction sufficient for my analysis.

The postcolonial aspects of the novel have been examined rather thoroughly. Kambili’s family is often regarded as a smaller version of the political state in Nigeria, and seen as reflecting each other at a personal and a national level. Eugene is a popular figure for analysis, and he is often viewed as a symbol of colonial oppression. In “Embodied Genealogies and Gendered Violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Writing,” for instance, Tony Simoes da Silva states that Eugene is an example of internalised colonialism, a victim of a terrifying childhood with Christian overtones and that mimicry has made him lose his true identity (456). In “Ora na-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels,” Madelaine Hron regards Eugene as a character who represents oppressive religion, colonial mimicry and patriarchy. Further, Eugene is discussed as a paradoxical character with values that Kambili has to adjust to and reformulate during her process of maturation (31).
As mentioned previously, I find the feminist perspective relevant for the purpose of my essay and will therefore apply ideas from *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* by bell hooks. hooks describes feminism as “common sense” and covers areas of violence, the notion of beauty and parenting. She discusses the aspect of abuse, and especially patriarchal violence. hooks places the notion of violence in a broader, social context, and regards sexist mentality as the cause of male violence against women (65). She claims that sexism is the core issue of our society and that we are socialized from birth to “accept sexist thought and action” (viii). Moreover, she considers the end of sexism to be one of feminism’s main goals (1). Violence is related to masculinity and the identity of men and used as a way of sustaining a patriarchal structure (64, 65). This notion of violence can be applied to *Purple Hibiscus*, since it is clear that Eugene’s ambiguous, terrorising behaviour holds his family in an insecure state of mind. The aspect of postcolonial trauma will be applied to deepen my analysis.

In the introduction to *Splintered Glass*, Herrero and Baelo-Allué describe how individual traumas in postcolonial literature have become a way of expressing cultural and ethnic traumas. In *Splintered Glass*, trauma theories from psychology and cultural sociology are combined and applied (x, xi-xii). Trauma is personal, found at the individual level but also situated in a social context, making it exist at a cultural, community level (ix-x). Herrero and Baelo-Allué further emphasise how personal and cultural trauma has to be combined to fully understand postcolonial literature and its complexity. To avoid simplified conclusions, theory must be combined with facts and the psychological with the cultural (xiv). Also, a complete individual healing is not possible until the “wrong” social, political and economic structures have been opposed and changed since historical conditions can be the origin of inequality and abuse (xix-xx).
The notion of trauma can thus be divided into a personal experience and a collective one. Trauma studies in the humanities have focused mostly on trauma at a personal level, and this perspective limits the understanding since it does not concern the social and historical context. By contrast, Holocaust studies have expanded the field because it has been regarded as a “massive” trauma affecting many people (Herrero and Baelo-Alluè ix-xi). Trauma is traditionally regarded as hurting the body and the mind of a person; it creates anxiety and is personally experienced (x, xi). This description of trauma can be applied to Kambili as a character since she suffers both physically and mentally from Eugene’s abuse. Collective trauma, on the other hand, is created by people who are “broadcasting claims of an injury and demanding reparation to an audience that needs to understand the nature of the pain, of the victim, and of those responsible for it” (xii). The demands for reparation are expressed through diverse sectors in society: the law, the media but also in the aesthetic domain of literature (xi-xii). Kambili seems only subtly aware of her own personal trauma, and therefore it can be suggested that she cannot even discern the cultural one.

To examine Kambili’s emotional development, her trauma and change, this essay will be divided into four parts. Even though the novel is not structured chronologically, I will apply a linear structure that follows the four visits to Nsukka. After the first three trips to Nsukka, there is a noticeable change in both Kambili and Jaja. The fourth visit is different since things have drastically changed, and Kambili decides to go on her own. I will be working with Kambili as a centre, while also comparing her to the people in her surroundings. Kambili’s change will be contrasted to the change in her brother Jaja, and I will argue that there is a clear difference between them when it comes to how they confront the oppression exercised by Eugene. This aspect will be studied from a gender perspective. Jaja also suffers, and he and Kambili share a bond of comfort and trust. However, this connection is lost, and they drift apart. The postcolonial perspective will be considered in terms of
alienation, individual and collective trauma. I want to point out that the feminist discussion will mainly concern traditional gender roles, and how they are maintained by means of violence and power.

First Visit to Nsukka

In this section I will examine Kambili’s submissive disposition and how Eugene uses violence to maintain control over her. Kambili’s search for a father figure will be considered, and individual trauma will be discussed in terms of its connection to cultural trauma.

Submission can be described as the opposite of dominance. In Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy, submission applies as an opposite term of dominance. Sadomasochism is about “power performances,” and power imbalance (20). Furthermore, submission is used as a synonym to loss of control and subjugation (188). I will apply the term in a feminist context and as the opposite to dominance and power, as obedience, passivity and powerlessness. Submission will not be regarded as part of role play or an explicit choice. I will treat it as a trait that is reinforced by violence and fear. I am aware that the term is applied differently in other theoretical areas, such as philosophy and religious studies.

During Kambili and Jaja’s first visit to Nsukka, it is noticeable that they handle their new freedom in different ways. Kambili is extremely tentative and wants to go back home, despite being included in a family that can “say anything at anytime to anyone, where the air [is] free” (Adichie 120). When Jaja suggests, by means of a glance, that they take part in singing while praying, Kambili reacts nervously: “No! I told him, with a tight blink. It was not right” (125). Also, socialising with Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene’s own father who is considered a “heathen,” creates a similar reaction (153). It is evident that Eugene’s voice speaks through her, and that she tries to maintain the control their father has over them. Jaja,
on the other hand, is quick to ignore their father’s rules. As discussed by Anna-Leena Toivanen in “Daddy’s Girls?: Father-Daughter Relations and the Failures of the Postcolonial Nation-State,” Kambili’s behaviour is submissive and self-effacing and it is clear that she has “internalised her father’s violent authority” (110). While Kambili is anxious, Jaja appears to fully take advantage of the freedom presented.

The wish for a change is less prominent in Kambili than in Jaja and this is due to her extreme fear of Eugene, but also a result of her submissive behaviour. For instance, back home, when Jaja asks Eugene for the key to his room, she states that their father could be right, that “being with Papa-Nnukwu had made Jaja evil, had made us evil” (Adichie 192). When Eugene speaks about how burning her feet is a logical form of punishment because she has walked into sin, she agrees: “I wanted to say ‘Yes, Papa,’ because he was right” (194). The scalding scene is an example of a patriarch exercising his power, and left unquestioned, it shows that Kambili conforms to Eugene’s perspective. hooks discusses how domestic abuse is another way of defining patriarchal violence and that it is committed by a person in order to maintain social control. In an authoritarian culture, physical abuse is considered an acceptable measure to use against a behaviour that threatens the structures of hierarchy (61-62, 64). Thus, with violence, Eugene has managed to incorporate a control mechanism that holds Kambili in a fearful and submissive state. Back home, Kambili’s relationship to her father is unchanged, and her reaction to Jaja’s new behaviour is a way of protecting Eugene’s position as a fearsome, but trustworthy patriarch.

Kambili defends the patriarchal structure in her family by denying abuse. After the scalding of Kambili’s feet, the conversation between her and Beatrice implies that Jaja also had his feet scalded, but it is never explicitly stated (Adichie 195). Moreover, Jaja and Kambili do not speak about their “padded feet” (197), but when it shows that Jaja has told Ifeoma about his finger that Eugene once broke, Kambili’s comment reveals her attitude:
“Had Jaja forgotten that we never told, that there was so much that we never told?” (154). Eugene is by Kambili seen as ‘perfect,’ and she is surprised at one point when he tells her a story from his youth: “I did not know he had committed any sins, that he could commit any sins” (196). Immediately after that, she thinks about the painting of Papa-Nnukwu (197). Interestingly, a shift in her admiration of Eugene seems to occur.

The incident with the painting of Papa-Nnukwu includes an aspect of a new, emerging father figure. The warm feelings that the painting evokes within Kambili, signifies a new source of admiration. In this sense, he can be regarded as a more sympathetic male father figure with which she replaces Eugene. The Igbo-culture represented by Papa-Nnukwu is, as Stobie points out, also patriarchal in structure but it lacks the colonial, violent aspect (423-24). Thematically, I would argue that Kambili is trading a violent, colonial father figure for a more traditional and sympathetic one. Kambili lies down in a fetal position, and refuses to stand up and lose touch with the remains of the picture: “It already represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have” (Adichie 210). This “something” could be a reference to a loving father that embraces his origins.

In the painting scene there is also a thematic element of connecting a trauma at a personal level with a trauma at the national level. In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, Neil J. Smelser points out that cultural trauma concerns nations, ideologies and power structures while personal trauma is related to psychological functions of handling experiences as coping, or defence mechanisms (Alexander et. al 39). Additionally, as discussed by Herrero and Baelo-Allué, a social and historical context may be required to fully process a personal trauma since events in history may be the cause of a specific psychological state. To examine this connection is particularly important from a postcolonial, literary perspective because the personal and cultural aspects are regarded as inseparable (xi, xiv). So, when Jaja touches the painting with his finger, broken by Eugene (Adichie 209), it can be interpreted as
an urge to connect the violence the Nigerian people have suffered with a traditional, warm, Igbo culture, represented by the picture of Papa-Nnukwu. It is worth noting that Kambili seems distracted: “I did not tell Jaja to stop, or to point out that it was his deformed finger that he was running over the painting” (209). The finger is mentioned three times on one page, and may imply a problematic aspect of her trauma-process where she refuses to acknowledge violence as a part of her own or Nigeria’s history.

Both Kambili and Eugene are unable to realise how their personal traumatic experiences are related to culture and community, which could be seen as an example of alienation. In Key Concepts in Cultural Studies, Maja Mikula describes “alienation” as a feeling of being both separated from a meaningful environment and yourself. In postcolonial studies, alienation is grounded in the subject’s experience of a separation from a pre-colonial identity (5-6). For instance, when Eugene finds Kambili and Jaja watching the painting, he is tense and starts to sway (Adichie 209-10). This could be a sign of repressed feelings that resurface, indicating a personal trauma that is grounded in alienation. Considering Eugene as an example of internalised colonialism, as da Silva does (456), it may be argued that he is giving his family the same treatment he experienced as a child, before he was ‘rescued’ by Christianity. Since Kambili appears to be so uninterested about the political situation, it could be proposed that she also is incapable of realising the wrongness of the abuse, which is connected to Eugene’s colonial upbringing.

Kambili’s uninterested attitude towards the purple hibiscuses in Nsukka can be read as a sign of her inability to place herself in a political context. Jaja, by contrast, is instantly fascinated with the flowers (Adichie 128). The flowers have a clear symbolic value. Toivanen interprets them as a representation of “freedom and resistance” (113). The purple hibiscuses are, in my opinion, clearly linked to Jaja throughout the novel. When Jaja speaks about the purple hibiscuses, Kambili appears unaffected (Adichie 197) but she also associates them
with Jaja and his “defiance” (16), which implicitly makes Kambili an observer. Her awareness could be an expression of a tentative political awareness, but she does not act or participate in any way – be it by discussion or thought. She is passive. For instance, when a complex question of political resistance and corruption is raised by Ifeoma and Obiora (145), Kambili shows no interest in the subject but is only jealous of Jaja’s ability to speak his mind. She seems more concerned about the world from an emotional and personal perspective.

In this section, I have shown how Kambili’s reluctance to change is grounded in fear of Eugene. Her search for a father figure is noticeable, and her refusal and uninterested attitude in the political situation, and in questions of rebellion and resistance, but also her denial of patriarchal violence, shows how she positions herself as passive. Also, it seems she is more exposed to Eugene’s controlling mentality than Jaja, which could be due to her submissive behaviour. It can also be argued that her affection for Eugene is due to their mutual inner pain and alienation. They both avoid questioning colonialism or the abuse of themselves as children. A thematic connection between the personal and the cultural trauma is literally made by Jaja, but since Kambili seems so disturbed about the broken finger, it is possible that she refuses to acknowledge the abuse in her own family, but also violence as an aspect of the postcolonial situation.

**Second Visit to Nsukka**

In this section I will discuss traditional gender roles and emotional dependency, to show how Kambili is socialised into a culturally expected feminine behaviour. I will also examine masculinity and its connection to violence, and further, how Kambili trades one father figure for another. Her uninterested attitude concerning political questions will also be considered. I will start by explaining the concept of traditional gender roles and emotional dependency.
In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson explains traditional gender roles as the basis for inequality between the sexes. Traditional gender roles propose men as strong, determined and rational, and women as weak, emotional and submissive. Furthermore, these roles are grounded in sexism, which is the notion of men and women as binary opposites, born with physical differences that affect and control us mentally and emotionally (85). Submission can thus be regarded as a characteristic that is integrated into a feminine gender role – to conform, being passive and silent. I will treat silence and timidity as part of a feminine characteristic, as opposed to the more outgoing, self-assertive male. Emotional dependency is a term that is, more or less, specifically used. In *Emotional Self: A Sociocultural Exploration*, Deborah Lupton relates it to a psychodynamic perspective in social-cultural studies that concerns intimacy and why men and women have different approaches to emotional interaction. Emotional dependency may be more threatening to men than women because it is associated with femininity (122). I will use the term in a more general sense, meaning a somewhat exaggerated need of support, affirmation and attention from a person that is admired. It thus includes an aspect of inequality, and can be tied to the notion of the female gender role due to its characteristic of submission and emotional focus.

During this visit, Kambili is exposed to ideas about how to behave as a female and she is encouraged to take on a specific gender role. Amadi expresses his view about women when he compares Kambili to Amaka, favouring Kambili’s silent personality: “See how your cousin sits quiet and watches? ... She does not waste her energy in picking never-ending arguments. But there is a lot going on in her mind, I can tell” (Adichie 173). This comment can also be interpreted as a rather general and normative view of how women should behave, as passive, timid and listening. When Amadi asks Kambili about taking the role of “The Lady” in a play, “the prettiest girl in the junior convent always played Our Lady” (239), it could be considered as a case of harmless flirtation. However, it is clear that female beauty is
portrayed as important and desirable. Moreover, he never encourages her to speak, but physically stretches her mouth to make her smile (177). These are also examples of how Kambili is being exposed to the male gaze. Tyson explains the male gaze as an evaluative perspective, which men observe women from, seeing them as objects. It signifies a structural power position – making men the active determiners. The male gaze also includes thoughts on how women should behave, dress, speak, and in what areas of life they are considered trustworthy (101-02).

Kambili’s attention shifts from admiring and fearing Eugene to admiring and longing for Amadi. Although there is a discernible change in her – she questions things, speaks more and even sings – Kambili only replaces one idealised man with another one. She is overwhelmed: “’Crush’ was mild. It did not come close to what I felt, how I felt” (Adichie 219). Her feelings are similar to those she has, or had, for Eugene (25), and hence approach a blind admiration that situates her as longing, passive and quiet. Toivanen claims that Amadi is a life-affirming force because he makes Kambili forget about Eugene. Moreover, her sexuality is evoked and her relationship to religion becomes more liberal. At the same time, Toivanen interprets Kambili’s admiration of Amadi as a result of an intense search for a father figure and she claims that he turns into “a new masculine authority” (111). This view is appealing, but I also want to link it to a question of submission and emotional dependency. When Amadi’s fingers touch her tongue during communion, she wants to “fall at his feet” (241). This shows her total resignation before a God-like man, and perhaps also a lack of emotional strength. Although Kambili’s new force of love is liberating, she only replaces her admiration and fear of Eugene with a less fearsome but still worship-like love for Amadi.

The physical abuse exercised by Eugene is excused once more, and it shows how violence and male dominance are hard to separate. When Amaka defends Eugene after his abuse of Beatrice, she blames it on stress: “People have problems, people make mistakes”
(Adichie 251). The abuse is spoken of as temporary and not as a structural, recurring event. Furthermore, Amaka continually searches for Obiora’s, her younger brother’s, attention while speaking about it, which can be explained as an implicit way of letting Obiora decide the morality of her statement. hooks sees masculinity as a promotion of a male identity that includes a focus on dominance. Moreover, she discusses how masculinity is measured in terms of control over others (70). Therefore, it can be suggested that Amaka’s sudden insecurity exposes a view of Eugene’s assumed right to behave tyrannically. Further, this may be regarded as an example of how abusive behaviour is excused when associated with male authority.

Kambili’s chance of resistance is indirectly complicated by her gender role. Hron states that the novel is driven by a father-son conflict, and she regards Kambili’s maturation process as a struggle, connected to the young Nigerian postcolonial state (30-31). The struggle for freedom at both these levels is, in my opinion, clearly linked to Jaja. When he mentions that the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom, it can be read as a comment on his own forthcoming rebellion (Adichie 253). Also, when Kambili watches Jaja’s confrontation with Eugene she tries to calm him down, which shows how uneasy she is with Jaja’s rebellious behaviour: “my shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth” (6). By doing so, she clearly shows that behaving that way towards Eugene is not an option. Kambili could join Jaja in his revolt, but she does not. Considering that this event is the climax of the novel, Jaja has the stage all to himself. A “patriarchal woman” is a woman who has internalised the structure of patriarchy, which is the belief that males are superior to women, and that this is the natural order of life (Tyson 85). This could be the reason she does not interfere, because it is understood to be an area where she is powerless. In “The Representation of Child Deprivation in Three Contemporary African Novels: An Exploration,” Jack Kearney discusses how Kambili is more exposed to male oppression by being a girl. Her ability for
liberation is much more restricted due to gender relations and her emotional dependence on Eugene is also compared to “servitude” (139-40). Moreover, the conflict between father and son may exclude Kambili since she is a female. Instead, it is presented as a way for Jaja to challenge Eugene’s position of power – as an issue that concerns male dominance.

Despite her emotional awakening, falling in love with Amadi and the feeling of freedom it creates, Kambili’s uninterested attitude towards the political situation in her country is still intact. For instance, Kambili does not understand what “students rioting” means (Adichie 228) and when soldiers search through Ifeoma’s house, she does not seem concerned but only recounts what happens (230-31). By contrast, she worries that the turmoil will result in Ifeoma leaving, thus making Nsukka inaccessible to her and Jaja (229). The cause of the turmoil seems irrelevant to her, and it shows how she is focused on a personal dimension of freedom, disconnected from the political. It could also be regarded as a question that concerns gender roles – she does not admit to herself that she is concerned about ‘unfeminine’ areas such as political discussions. Moreover, Kambili does not make a connection between the students rioting and Ifeoma as a politically interested lecturer. It could be that Ifeoma actually supports the riots, as is implied in one of her comments: “Since when have students needed somebody to tell them when to riot?” (231).

In this section, I have shown how Kambili continues her search for a new, strong and reliable father figure. Her object of admiration is exchanged, which shows a need to have a masculine figure as emotional support. She both defends and fears Eugene as a dominant patriarch, and seems to regard Jaja’s rebellious behaviour as an unnecessary disturbance. She questions neither Eugene nor Amadi, nor the political situation in her country. Instead, Kambili’s change concerns the private, feminine areas – she falls in love. Jaja, on the other hand, openly confronts Eugene. This difference in behaviour could be a sign of how her feminine gender role excludes her from engaging in political questions.
I will now look at the financial dependence on a husband and how it can be used to explain a complex situation. I will further continue to examine Kambili’s faithful love for Eugene, and how she experiences a feeling of alienation. The Apparition of Virgin Mary will be discussed as both a strengthening and undermining force in Kambili’s development.

Material feminism claims that women are oppressed both socially and financially by patriarchal traditions and sexism. For instance, societal institutions such as marriage and motherhood are examples of how the oppression towards women is maintained (Tyson 96). Furthermore, material feminism is criticising the family as an economic unit where men perform the paid work and have control over the money (Tyson 98). These ideas can be linked to the contrast between Kambili’s mother Beatrice and her sister-in-law, who is the only woman in Purple Hibiscus that can be considered free and self-sufficient, with insight into the consequences of what financial dependence on a male can bring. When Ifeoma explains her point of view to Beatrice, who has suddenly shown up in Nsukka, she supports her argument with the examples of some of her married, female students: “the husbands own them and their degrees” (Adichie 75). When Beatrice defends Eugene’s violent behaviour by referring to his financial generosity, Ifeoma brings up her life together with her, now deceased, husband: “[T]here were times, nwunye m, when the university did not pay salaries for months. Ifediora and I had nothing, eh, yet he never raised a hand to me” (250). This can be read as a way of communicating that hardships are not an excuse for abuse. Beatrice answers by referring to material conditions, which makes her vulnerability clear: “Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? ... ” (250). A rhetorical question reveals that Beatrice is highly aware of a problematic aspect that pinpoints Eugene’s position of power – he owns the house and everything else.
Beatrice’s secret poisoning of Eugene can be read as a feminist awakening. Stobie interprets the poisoning as an act of violence, “a sad necessity” to end the tyranny (427). It could be stated that Beatrice uses a form of self-defence to eradicate the powerful, abusive force in control, but also that it is a way of increasing her own power and that she has finally taken action due to realising the inequality of her marriage. The trigger appears to be that she loses another baby due to Eugene’s beatings (248), and the decision seems to already have been made when the fiery, previously mentioned discussion between Ifeoma and Beatrice takes place: “I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka” (Adichie 290). However, Kambili’s notably strong reaction to the poisoning is a sign of defiance.

Kambili’s sudden rage is a loud protest against the overthrow of the head of the family. After realising that Beatrice has killed Eugene by putting poison into his tea, Kambili attacks Beatrice physically (Adichie 290). It is worth noting that the poison comes from “a powerful witch doctor” (290). It thus refers to a pre-colonial time – it is as if history itself kills Eugene. Interestingly, Hron discusses the tea incident in terms of an attack on colonial heritage, but never mentions Kambili’s reaction to the tea-poisoning and her rage is left uncommented (33). For Kambili, the tea seems to represent closeness and love. For instance, she describes how taking a sip results in “feeling the love burn my tongue” (Adichie 31), and “love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his love onto my tongue” (290). Thoughts of these love sips are evoked by the poisoning of the tea, which leads to an outbreak. Moreover, Jaja’s refusal to drink from the tea cups, which Eugene used (289), could be a statement of divergence from everything that Eugene represents. Kambili’s interpretation is a contrast to Jaja’s. The poisoning can in this sense be regarded as an attack on Kambili and Eugene’s relationship.

Despite everything, Kambili still thinks about her father, and is torn between the recognisable old and the unknown new. She misses Eugene: “I did want to talk to Papa, to
hear his voice, to tell him what I had eaten and what I had prayed about so that he would approve” (Adichie 268). At the same time, she wants to leave with Amadi and Ifeoma “and never come back” (268). In “Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Redemption,” Cynthia R. Wallace claims that Ifeoma and Amadi can be seen as “surrogate parents” for Kambili since they help her heal and evolve (474). In my opinion, Amadi and Ifeoma are figures of freedom that represent a new way of life that Kambili longs for, but it appears as if she still regards Eugene as a person she wants to obey and please. In addition, her ambiguous statement could be an expression of alienation – her complex feelings about the ‘new,’ postcolonial Nigeria symbolised by Amadi and Ifeoma, and her ‘old’ and reliable but also fearful connection with the patriarchal Eugene.

With both Ifeoma and Amadi leaving the country, the less strict and more life-affirming approach of religion and the freedom of speech are symbolically endangered. Amadi may be regarded as an educated ‘force.’ Stobie claims that Amadi’s view on Catholicism, with its use of Igbo songs during mass, is a religious form that is more suited for a less traditionally strict Nigeria (424). Ifeoma is criticised for leaving the country by one of her colleagues, who thinks that the educated people should stay and fight: “The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot resist. Do you not see it is a cycle?” (Adichie 244-45). This can be considered a political statement and the conversation can thus be read as an image of the state of the nation that Kambili is left in – she belongs to the “weak” and is left behind in a country that needs its intellectuals that are politically aware and crave a change. This conversation and its connection to Nigeria as a nation are discussed by Toivanen, who regards it as a crucial matter concerning Nigeria’s future. Toivanen further notes that, in contrast to Ifeoma, Kambili herself never thinks of leaving the country, which is due to Kambili’s psychological dependence on her father (112).
In the scene with the Apparition of the Virgin Mary, Kambili’s need for an authority figure is transformed, and she finds a new source of admiration. The Apparition expresses a healing force, but it also reinforces Kambili’s submissive disposition. Stobie discusses the Virgin Mary as a symbol of purity, unconditional love and humility, and further claims that the apparition presents a new kind of femininity that changes Kambili and her inner core (430-32). The problematic aspect of this imagery is the narrowness of character that is suggested. Being sensitive and shy are not bad traits, but in a context of the Virgin Mary and an already submissive girl, the event becomes ironically excessive. The apparition is evoked by a girl who is “dressed in white” and guarded by “strong-looking men” so that she will not be crushed (Adichie 274). This image suggests that the female is fragile and needs to be protected by men. Thus, an emblem of what Kambili is and always has been – a girl in need of male father figures that will protect her.

In conclusion, it may be argued that Nigeria is thematically abandoned by its educational ‘elite,’ and Kambili’s feeling of helplessness is balanced with a new, religious femininity that turns her into what she has always been: a humble, sensitive and forgiving creature. Her alienation is transformed into a girl with typical feminine traits, and her change into becoming the ultimate loving and forgiving female is close to its completion.

Fourth Visit to Nsukka

In this section, I will focus on how Kambili’s ‘new’ femininity contributes to a passive approach with regards to political questions and also how her feminine disposition both hinders her from acknowledging a trauma and blinds her from the apparent danger that is approaching on the new horizon – another patriarchal figure, embedded in a ‘new’ silence.
Kambili avoids the political discussion presumably due to her gender. This attitude is perhaps grounded in her belief of how to behave as a female which restricts her from engaging in political issues, but can also be due to the lack of politically interested women around her. Ifeoma’s letter to Kambili declares that Ifeoma cannot stay in a country where some claim that “we cannot rule ourselves” (Adichie 301). Furthermore, she compares Nigeria to a small baby that crawls while others walk (301). These thoughts imply Ifeoma’s awareness of the complexity of a country with a colonial history. Kambili finds the letter so interesting that she memorises most of it, but she is confused about why Ifeoma sent it to her. She seems to think that she is unable to contribute politically or intellectually. Also, Kambili’s reaction resembles her blind admiration of Eugene: “Renewed Democracy. It sounded important, the way he said it. But then most of what Papa said sounded important” (Adichie 25). Both examples testify to a superficial, shallow admiration that appears to lack a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Thus, she seems to admire people with political opinions while avoiding to participate herself.

The postcolonial trauma is acknowledged by Jaja and Ifeoma, but Kambili is trapped in a personal sphere of suppressed pain. When Ifeoma compares Nigeria to a small baby that crawls while others walk (Adichie 301), it is thematically linked to Jaja’s comment about Ade Coker’s baby: “She may have started talking now, but she will never heal” (259). Thus, the complexity of Nigeria as a postcolonial nation is referred to as a collective trauma by both Ifeoma and Jaja. There is no prospect of progress but they both express a consciousness about Nigeria as ‘hurt.’ In one of Amadi’s letters, where he advises Kambili not to search for answers, since there are none, she instantly knows that he means Eugene: “he was stirring what I was afraid to stir myself” (303). This shows how she still, after almost three years, avoids thinking about the abuse. According to Herrero and Baelo-Allué, postcolonial trauma is visible on the individual as well as the community level and the connection between the
two is of importance since trauma is hard to process, to understand and to heal without considering both areas (xiii-xiv). Since Kambili never seems to recognise the harm caused by her father, or to consider Nigeria as traumatised as a nation, it could be suggested that she is unable to start the process of healing.

The silence at the end of the novel shows how their trauma is still to be found below the surface. It is described as more comfortable, but Kambili mentions that they never speak about anything, not even the bribing of policemen, prison guards and judges (Adichie 297). The bribing reveals desperation, but also an involvement in the corrupt Nigerian state. They never admit the abuse and it stays in the domain of the private, suppressed, family-oriented sphere. Healing is implied in several parts of the novel, and Kambili has a profound experience during the apparition of Virgin Mary, but it is a spiritual enlightenment which does not propose a formulation of a concrete problem. Furthermore, the worrying situation of Jaja in prison together with the “new rains” (307), this “new” silence could be read as a sign of future trouble. There is a ‘new’ problem implied, distinctly noticeable in Jaja who appears traumatised and introverted; his innocent and curious attitude is replaced by a hard and heavy aura – they do not hug “because he does not like us to” (Adichie 304). His eyes are described as “unyielding” (305) and Kambili mentions that she wants to hold his hand but that she knows that “he will shake it free” (305). The surroundings and the state of the postcolonial nation together with Jaja’s behaviour, gives the end a subtle gloom.

In prison, a seemingly traumatised Jaja prepares to take over the role as the family’s new patriarch. Jaja’s eyes are blank and the bond he and Kambili had, speaking with their eyes (Adichie 22, 30) enduring the terror of Eugene while suffering in silence, is long gone (305). During a visit to prison, Jaja comments on Beatrice’s scarf not being tied well, and she instantly reties it. Kambili stares in amazement (306). Jaja has never before noticed or cared about what other people wear, and Kambili’s reaction could originate from a previous
situation where she asked Beatrice to tighten it, but received the answer that it was tied tight enough (296). In this scene, Jaja suddenly shows a need to correct a woman’s appearance. Interestingly, Beatrice’s reaction implies that she listens more to Jaja than Kambili. Wallace interprets Jaja’s taking the blame for the poisoning as an ideological irony, and she compares him both to the sacrificial Christ he so openly criticises, but also regards it as a behaviour grounded in the Igbo culture where a son is supposed to protect his widowed mother (477-78). Stobie considers Jaja’s behaviour as altruistic (427). I would suggest that his sacrifice should be seen as a masculine characteristic; as a performance of hegemonic masculinity, which is an expression of an idealised belief of how to act as a man. It builds on Butler's performativity theory, where gender is performed with the help of repetition and imitation of behaviour and speech and concerns gender relations and its hierarchies (Key Terms in Discourse Analysis 52, 54). In a previous situation, Jaja compares himself to Obiora while portraying himself as weak and irresponsible: “I should have taken care of Mama. Look how Obiora balances Aunty Ifeoma’s family on his head, and I am older than he is” (Adichie 289). In other words, Jaja has changed from a sensitive and rather feminine boy to an insecure, rigid and cold one, highly aware of the appropriate behaviour for a ‘real man.’

When Kambili visits Nsukka, the place of change and laughter, on her own, it is clear that it no longer exists. This is primarily due to the fact that Ifeoma has left, but also because it is described as a gloomy, deserted place – the university ground is overgrown, and the lion statue “no longer gleams” (Adichie 298). Thus, the symbols of knowledge and political awareness are abandoned. However, Kambili laughs loudly and to her, Nsukka still seems to be a place of marvel (299). Her behaviour appears rather dissonant, since it is contrasted to the previously mentioned emptiness of Nsukka, but also to her visit to prison, where Jaja’s miserable situation is obvious: “He does not mind sleeping with mice and cockroaches, but he does mind having another man’s feces in his face” (299). Since the force of
acknowledging the wrongs of the Nigerian state has vanished, symbolised by Nsukka, everything is devoid of life and a promising force.

Kambili’s optimism and joy creates a contrast to the narrated, rather hopeless, situation. When speaking to Beatrice after their visit to prison, she shows signs of a childish mentality: “We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we’ll go to America to visit Aunty Ifeoma ... We’ll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too” (306-07). Kambili also sees Jaja as a hero: “the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could” (305). It appears as if she is still searching for a man to admire, that can offer her emotional stability and protection. Together with the scarf-scene, this optimism creates a worrying impression of a future that is not as bright as she thinks, or hopes for. I would like to suggest that Jaja’s behaviour and the description of him is alarming, and foreshadows an upcoming, cruel, patriarch. The ending is open and Adichie leaves Kambili with hope for a better future, but due to the contrast of optimism and depression, I discern trouble.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown how Kambili is submissive. Despite her search for love and affirmation, she may be considered a person who has internalised patriarchal structures. First, her admiration and fear is focused on Eugene, who is viewed as a perfect God-like creature. Second, her attention shifts to Papa-Nnukwu, and then to Amadi. In the end, her focus of attention is directed at a ‘feminine,’ forgiving and godlike presence, fully experienced in the scene of the apparition. The father figure, who has undergone a change from rigid to mild, eventually turns into a feminine authority. The Virgin Mary experience, on the other hand, can be regarded as an indoctrination of passivity that promotes ultra-feminine traits such as
forgiveness and unconditional love. In addition, her admiration of Jaja can also be read as a shift in her attention, where she, again, admires and looks up to a man.

Both Kambili and Jaja conform to traditional, predisposed gender roles. Regarding the feminist perspective, Kambili’s change cannot be stated as positive since it may be argued that she has merely developed into a submissive female who is infatuated with the memory of her father and who does not dare to question anything. She simply cannot handle the trauma Eugene has caused – the opportunity of a profound change that the purple hibiscuses were offering is gone. Moreover, I find the last prison scene particularly worrying. Jaja, her comforting friend and brother, is in prison and his new, cold eyes are impossible to communicate with. It may be argued that Jaja has developed into a ‘man’ by being exposed to and socialised into ideas of masculinity.

Kambili’s longing for a father figure can be interpreted as an expression of a Nigeria that longs for stability, but she never seems to connect her personal trauma to the trauma at the community level. Instead, it is Jaja who brings the wish for a change into their house, and it may be argued that he symbolises a desire for a change both back home and politically. However, Toivanen states that the paradoxical character of Eugene is mirroring the novel’s ambiguous attitude towards a feeling of national unity, and on the other hand, a reluctance of achieving a change, since it seems to demand a violent revolution (107-108). It could be suggested that also Kambili, who feels alienated and appears to have internalised her father’s patriarchal authority, is a result of this ambiguity.

Purple Hibiscus is a complex but engaging novel and it offers a considerable amount of interpretive conclusions from a postcolonial and feminist viewpoint. I am aware of that my analysis may appear simplistic in its basic feminist approach, and that postcolonial feminism could have been a more appropriate theory for the purpose of my essay. Splintered Glass concerns trauma theory, postcolonial literature and narration, and although relevant in several
ways, it lacks a feminist aspect. Interestingly, Wallace emphasises the complexity of *Purple Hibiscus*, and argues that Westerners tend to read it from a “neo-colonialist” feminist perspective, which results in simplified and imperialist-like analyses and conclusions (466-467). She claims that the novel criticises both patriarchal, colonial Christianity and the Igbo culture, but also states that the novel’s paradoxical properties and its ambivalence, its “dynamic process of critique and embrace” makes it challenging to discuss (467). I agree, since thoughts of perceiving and judging the novel from a Western perspective have come to my mind during the process of writing. In contrast, I find the feminist aspect to be crucial in determining to what extent sexism is excused, and how it contributes to oppression of human beings by associating violence with masculinity. For instance, Ifeoma clearly states the importance of education and the courage of questioning to reveal patriarchal thinking and social injustice.

A topic I would like to see explored from a gender perspective is how traumatic experiences on the personal and the cultural level are connected.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


