

# Negotiating Domestic Violence: An Analysis of Mama Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*

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## Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a novel that portrays the place of women in African society. Here women are consigned to the lower ranks and are expected to be submissive and play the roles prescribed by the patriarchal society. Mama (Beatrice Achike) in *Purple Hibiscus* is a woman who has internalised the patriarchal values and has modelled herself as a stereotypical woman. She takes care of her children but does not speak out against Eugene's violence against herself and her children. After the birth of Kambili [her daughter and the narrator of the novel], she suffers several miscarriages because of her husband's brutal beatings. Though Mama is a close with Aunty Ifeoma who is an independent woman, Mama refuses to act on Ifeoma's advice to act against the violence for her own sake and that of the children. Bound and constrained by the social dictates of African society, she feels she cannot leave husband, however bad he may be. But as Eugene's abusive behaviour worsens and causes yet another miscarriage she does slowly poison him. This inexplicable transformation has been deftly and convincingly portrayed by Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus*. The proposed paper will analyse and explain the early submissiveness and her acceptance of domestic violence in the novel and the later transformation and assertion

of Mama, who goes to the extent of poisoning her husband to liberate her from the suffocating spurious dignified life.

**Keywords: Domestic violence, Patriarchy, Miscarriage, Submissiveness, Assertion.**

### **Negotiating Domestic Violence: an Analysis of Mama Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus***

Domestic violence is one of the predominant points at issue in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Asa Don Brown observes that "Domestic violence is any behaviour involving physical, psychological, emotional, sexual or verbal abuse. It is the any form of aggression intended to hurt, damage, or kill an intimate person". Any kind of physical or mental abuse which harms any person in a domestic setup can be considered as domestic violence. Connie Mitchell tells that domestic violence is certainly intimate partner violence when it happens in a spousal relationship (319–320). Domestic violence often leads to physical disfigurement and even death and certainly can leave in the victim long term psychological scars.

Universally, women are the major victims of domestic violence in the hands of men. García-Moreno and Heidi Stöckl says that

Intimate male partners are most often the main perpetrators of violence against women, a form of violence known as intimate partner violence, 'domestic' violence or 'spousal (or wife) abuse.' Intimate partner violence and sexual violence, whether by partners, acquaintances or strangers, are common worldwide and disproportionately affect women, although are not exclusive to them. (780–781)

Mama Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* is a character who silently accepts domestic violence because she has internalised the secondary status and suppression of women. She is a mother of two children Kambili and Jaja and Mama puts up with all the physical and emotional abuse perpetrated by her husband Eugene who often gives his violence a religious justification. She is the kind of woman who sacrifices everything for her violent husband and timid children. Adichie depicts Mama Beatrice as a submissive woman who obeys her husband without raising any

questions against him in the most parts of the novel, but at the end of the novel she evolves into an individual self, who decides on the future course of her life. So to protect herself and her children from her physically abusive husband she dares to poison him to death

The novel begins with Jaja not attending the Communion in the church. This enrages Papa Eugene who picks a missal and throws it at Jaja. The missal sweeps the ceramic figurines of ballet dancers, the favourite of Mama Beatrice which she polished very often. Mama remains a silent spectator; neither does she express her grief on breaking her favourite figurines nor does try to protect Jaja. As usual she was a dumb spectator.

One Sunday pregnant Beatrice makes a half-hearted visit to Father Benedict (their church priest). That night Kambili and Jaja hear heavy thuds from their parents' room. Mama Beatrice was being cruelly beaten up by Eugene for not obeying him willingly to come to visit church priest. After Mama Beatrice is taken to hospital, the children came out of their rooms and find drops of blood on the floor: ““There is blood on the floor,” Jaja said. “ I’ll get the brush from the bathroom.” 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 downstairs. Jaja scrubbed while I [Kambili] wiped” (33). Next day Beatrice tells her children that, “there was an accident, the baby is gone” (34). Papa Eugene’s violence was so cruel that the child was aborted. Mama Beatrice has suffered several miscarriages because of her husband’s brutal beatings. According to Johnson; et al. “during the period of pregnancy, a woman when abused may initiate certain biological and morphological changes, causing negative health effects to the mother and foetus” (213).

On the contrary, in *Purple Hibiscus*, Aunty Ifeoma is an independent woman; she is a university professor who tries to influence her students and Kambili’s mother with her rationalistic ideas. In the early part of the novel, Mama is not influenced by Aunty Ifeoma’s unconventional ideas. Aunty’s urging of Mama to retaliate to the violence of Eugene goes unheeded. She expresses her helplessness to Ifeoma: “where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Tell me, where would I go?” (250). Beatrice could never contemplate such defiance because it had been reinforced into her psyche that a woman without her husband was a nonentity in society. She never has the confidence and assertiveness of Aunt Ifeoma because Mama has always been economically dependent on her husband. She accepts the position of the being the other thrust upon her by patriarchy. She fears societal shaming and has accepted her hogtie situation.

The beatings never stop. The miscarriage had not softened Eugene’s violence. There are a few more abortions. Once, when Mama Beatrice visits Nsukka to take her children back home,

Aunty Ifeoma enquires about health “You were in hospital? What happened?” Aunty Ifeoma asked quietly. “You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne*? Your father broke it on my belly” (248). His brutal behaviour has again led to one more abortion. Even after these successive brutalities Mama Beatrice is never willing to disown her husband.

An abusive husband as the novel shows need not be abusive in his other relationships. He displays remorse and regret to his children. Kambili is beaten up by Eugene for bringing her grandfather’s painting from aunty Ifeoma’s house “the metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes” (210). When she opened her eyes in hospital Eugene is praying to god for her quick recovery. “Papa was nearby. He, too, was muttering prayers, his hands resting gently on my side. I closed my eyes (211). Eugene was a loving father to his children.

Eugene always helps the poor. He pays for the education of poor children from his resources. The gateman Haruna told Kambili that “Did we know our pather faid his children’s school pees? Did we know our pather had helped his wipe get the messenger job at the Local Government oppice? We were lucky to have such a pather” (103). Eugene is also a man who stands for truth with no fear. Though he gets threats for his newspaper and though his editor Ade Coker is killed for criticising the ruling government, he continues to run the newspaper against the government to take the truth to the people. Nobody would see streaks of such violent in a man of so much goodness and virtues. For the outside world Eugene is always a man of benevolence. But at home he was different. There is a psychological explanation for this split personality. According to Miya Yamanouchi “An abuser isn’t abusive 24/7. They usually demonstrate positive character traits most of the time. That’s what makes the abuse so confusing when it happens, and what makes leaving so much more difficult”. Eugene displays two entirely different personalities throughout the novel. It is also his societal status and good reputation that discourages Beatrice from leaving her husband.

Donald Dutton and Painter in "Traumatic Bonding: The Development of Emotional Attachments in Battered Women and Other Relationships of Intermittent Abuse" say that “In abusive relationships, there may be a cycle of abuse during which tensions rise and an act of violence is committed, followed by a period of reconciliation and calm. Victims of domestic violence may be trapped in domestic violent situations through isolation, power and control, traumatic bonding to the abuser” (139-155). This cycle of abuse happens every time in Eugene’s house. This makes Beatrice situation more difficult to leave her husband. The principle reasons

behind Mama's acceptance of her surrender to abusive husband are cultural conditioning, lack of financial resources and fear of disgrace.

Beatrice suffers domestic violence and oppression in the hands of Eugene. But another important factor that stopped her from seeking an escape was her religious conditioning. As Louis Althusser in his "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" observes religion can serve as an ideological way of controlling people. To Beatrice her allegiance to the tenets of the Catholic Church is inviolable. Divorce is not proscribed for Catholic Christians. Christianity regularly emphasizes the permanence of marital relationship and its moral soundness in the Gospels. Paul in his *First Epistle to the Corinthians* Chapter 7 says: "Let not the wife depart from her husband...let not the husband put away his wife" (Corinthians 7:10). As he says in his *Epistle to the Romans* that a woman is destined to serve a man "for the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he liveth." (Romans 7:2).

The suppressed emotions and anger of Beatrice could not be held back long and she dares to poison him. She adds poison to his tea: "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (290). At his death the post-mortem report reveals the poisoning and the son Jaja takes upon himself the guilt and goes to prison. The novel ends with the hope that Jaja would be released soon and there would be no more fear or violence because Eugene is no more.

Women must break their position of being the 'other' or an 'object' and become themselves essential beings as subjects. This evolution of women would end abusive relationships into which women are compelled to spend their lives. Women evolving into more assertive beings will transform society into a non gender unbiased society. This is what Chimamanda Adichie has attempted to achieve in this novel and she has done it successfully and artistically.

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