

## Examining the Influence of Second Wave Feminism in *Purple Hibiscus*: Challenging Gender Roles and Empowering Women

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### ABSTRACT:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a renowned Nigerian writer and an unwavering advocate for gender equality. In her work, she emphasizes the importance of equal rights for both men and women, inspiring women to challenge gender-based discrimination, stereotypes, and the mistreatment of women. Adichie has received numerous accolades and nominations for her literary contributions. Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, published in 2003, received the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. The story follows the life of Kambili Achike, a young girl in post-colonial Nigeria, and her family. While her father portrays himself as a champion for human rights, he is an abusive and controlling figure at home, demanding obedience and conformity from his wife and children. The protagonist and her family are oppressed, unable to speak up or express themselves freely. Eventually, the mother takes matters into her own hands and poisons her husband after enduring multiple miscarriages due to his abuse. The novel depicts the transformation of a woman who initially adheres to patriarchal norms to one who finds the strength to stand up against her abusive husband.

This study aims to examine the relevance of the second wave of feminism in relation to *Purple Hibiscus*. The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1950s and 60s following the two World Wars. It addresses various issues faced by women, including domestic violence, sexism, gender-based discrimination, workplace safety, rape, social and individual injustice, and the dominance of patriarchy. This movement was sparked by Betty Friedan's book, "The Feminine Mystique," which argued that women were confined to finding their identity and fulfillment solely within their families. Throughout the study, multiple insights indicate the incorporation of second wave feminism ideologies in the novel. Adichie portrays two contrasting types of women through the character of Mama (Beatrice Achike) – one who adheres to traditional societal stereotypes and another who embraces her independence. Mama initially strives to be the perfect wife and mother to free herself and her children from the oppressive patriarchy, eventually finding solace in her decision.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender roles, Patriarchy, Domestic Abuse, Endure, women Empowerment, Liberation, Feminism.

### Introduction

The second wave of feminism, which took place in the 60s and 70s after the post-World Wars, was different from the first wave in several ways. While the first wave of feminism was more focused on suffrage and legal obstacles to gender equality such as equal voting rights and similar property rights, the second wave of feminism was much broader in nature and focused not just on legal equality but also on social, economic and political equality of the sexes. The second wave of feminism shifted its focus from inequality to the oppression of women in society. The feminist movement had evolved into one that pertained to the basic human rights which women at the time were being deprived of as they

were forced to stay home and take care of their husband and children without having any individuality of their own.

In the *Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, the book whose publication can be cited as the beginning of the second wave of feminism, Friedan talks about how the media was designed by men in such a way that it propagated the idea that women would be happy as housewives and did not need a life beyond their husband and children to feel happy. The commercials which played on TV at the time or even the TV shows always showed the female protagonist as a mother and housewife and she was shown as being content of it. The women were portrayed as being happy in the kitchen and being content with their family without having any individuality of their own. Friedan concluded that this was a way to reinforce the ideology pertaining to women's identity and to spread this propaganda to women that they would only find happiness and feel accomplished as housewives.

The second wave of feminism is set in the backdrop of the Second World War when men had to go for war and women took over the industrial jobs. Once the men returned women were expected to go back to being housewives and mothers. That was the limitation of their identity. Betty Friedan marks that the period of post-world war saw a sadness among women, one that could not be explained. She states that the cause of this sadness was the fact that women were constrained to identities revolving around others, be it their husbands or their children. Women were deprived of education and were told to treat housework as their career. Women were deprived of creating a life that revolved around them but instead were forced to have a life that revolved around their husbands and children. They found it difficult to go back to that lifestyle after being given independence while working in the industries.

Betty Friedan advocated that women should not be forced to treat housework as their career and they should instead be encouraged to find work that is mentally challenging. She stated that women should be seen as more than just housewives and by finding careers that are mentally challenging women would actually feel fulfilled, and not by just being mothers and housewives. Betty also stated that any sort of barriers to education for women should be removed as education is the only way to escape from being trapped and oppressed. Friedan acknowledged that women will face resistance in this but they should advocate for a change in gender roles and gender equality on all fronts.

In the book, *Purple Hibiscus*, set in the African country of Nigeria, the author touches upon feminism by portraying the oppression of women and their struggle to push back against the oppressive patriarchy. The story follows the life of a fifteen-year-old girl, Kambili. She lives with her mother, Mama, her father, Papa, and her seventeen-year-old brother, Jaja. Papa is a newspaper publisher and a champion for human rights, however, in his own home he is an extremely abusive man. Papa regularly beats up his children and his wife and punishes them anytime whenever they disobey him. His children and wife are expected to live by his rules the way he envisions their life for them, if they don't then they are subjected to severe abuse. The author mentions that Papa had even beaten up his wife so badly that she had had a miscarriage. In the beginning she is a submissive woman who appears as a good wife she would stay quiet and endure his abuse.

This is symbolic of the patriarchy that has always been prevalent in society where the male figure oppresses the women in his life and does not let them have any sort of freedom or even thoughts of their own. Women are expected to blindly obey the patriarch and behave the way he wants, even have the thinking that the patriarch expects of them.

We observed in the novel that Papa regularly beats up Mama and shows no remorse even when she suffers miscarriages. His anger at her disobedience overpowers the loss of their child. He even shows utmost disregard for her physical and mental wellbeing. He exhibits the same behaviour towards his daughter whom he regularly beats up. At one point in the novel, Kambili's grades slip after her mother suffers a miscarriage. This causes Papa to beat her up so badly that she ends up in the hospital. For Papa her daughter having bad grades and not being 'perfect' the way he wants her to causes him to show utmost disregard for her wellbeing and hurt her. This is symbolic of how the patriarchy oppresses women to an extent that they exhibit complete disregard for them and their wellbeing.



The novel also introduced the readers to Papa's father, Papa-Nnukwu. Papa restricts his children from meeting his father for more than a few minutes during the holidays because he sees his father as a 'Heathen'. The novelist are also introduced to Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma, a university professor. Unlike her brother, Auntie Ifeoma is shown to be an open-minded person who invites her niece and nephew to attend traditional festivals and even invites them on a pilgrimage. Papa is reluctant to send his children on the pilgrimage but he eventually agrees.

Here we observe Papa depriving his children from spending time with individuals who are not of the same mentality as them. This portrays how the patriarchy keeps women away from people who have a different way of thinking so as to keep them from getting 'influenced' or having thoughts of their own that do not align with theirs. Women are expected to think the way of the patriarch. The patriarch restricts them from having thoughts of their own or thoughts that they don't agree with.

Upon arriving at her aunt's place, Kambili notices that her house is not as luxurious as theirs, however, her house is filled with the sounds of laughter and her children freely express themselves and state their minds without being punished. Kambili observes that the house encourages the children to listen to popular music and watch popular TV shows. Jaja takes to the environment well and adjusts to the lifestyle easily. Meanwhile, Kambili struggles slightly. But this is until she meets a young priest called Father Amadi whom she takes a liking to. Father Amadi encourages her to run, smile and sing. This helps Kambili open up and she eventually starts feeling free.

"It was what Auntie Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn't *Purple Hibiscus*."

The freedom of thought is an alien idea for Kambili but this is when the protagonist realizes that true happiness comes from liberation and the freedom of thought rather than from luxury. This is the idea that was also preached by Friednan who said that women need to have education and be mentally challenged at work for when they are able to think only then they would attain liberation and liberation is the only way to be happy.

Eventually in the novel, Papa Nnukwu, falls sick and Aunt Ifeoma brings him over to stay with them, in spite of the fact that Papa does not appreciate Kambili and Jaja spending time with him. While living with them Papa Nnukwu tells Kambili and Jaja several stories about himself and his life. When Papa learns of this, he gets extremely angry and comes to pick up Kambili and Jaja, however, Papa Nnukwu passes away shortly before his arrival. Papa blames the death of his father on his sister for not calling a priest when he took ill.

This once again shows the father figure's anger at his children being introduced to ideas that he does not agree with which angers him to a great extent. We see in the next time that Papa goes as far as to pour boiling water on his children for spending time with their grandfather. Papa discovers that they brought back souvenirs from their grandfather's place and he beats Kambili till she is unconscious. Kambili is admitted to a hospital and once she heals, she and Jaja go back to stay with their aunt where they feel free again.

One day Mama arrives in a taxi to take her children back home. Her face is bruised and she has suffered another miscarriage at the hands of her abusive husband. Aunt Ifeoma is outraged at this but Mama decides to leave and go home with her children. Here the reader sees the distinction between Mama and Aunt Ifeoma. While Aunt Ifeoma is an open-minded woman who believes in speaking out against the abuse and to not endure it, Mama remains quiet and obedient and continues to face abuse. Mama is shown as the ideal woman and how all women were expected to be in the 1960s and 70s,





while Aunt Ifeoma is the woman that women were told not to be like. Open minded with thoughts of their own.

When Kambili and Jaja return home Jaja starts being more rebellious and even refuses to take communion. This leads to Papa throwing a big book at Jaja, the book however misses Jaja and breaks Mama's statues. The statues were the only objects in the house where Mama ever found solace.

"I meant to say I am sorry that Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama *Purple Hibiscus*."

Papa suddenly dies a few days later and it is learned that he was poisoned. Mama admits to Kambili and Jaja that she had been feeding him poison ever since her miscarriage. However, when the police arrive Jaja takes the fall for the crime and is sent to jail. Jaja stays in jail for a few years but is released when pro-democracy groups start accusing the military of poisoning Papa over political conflicts. Once Jaja has been released Mama, Kambili, and he starts planning for a bright future.

The transformation of Mama's character is symbolic of the ideologies during the second wave of feminism. Mama went from being a housewife, oppressed under her abusive husband, to one who fights back and empowers herself by freeing herself from her husband. It is symbolic of her radicalization from the good woman to the real woman. The reader would also observe a transformation in the protagonist, Kambili. Kambili is portrayed as an obedient young girl who is expected to be perfect. She too endures her father's abuse and does not speak up. Once she visits her aunt and observes how freely her children express themselves, she too starts slowly opening up, especially after she is encouraged to open up.

The *Purple Hibiscus* related strongly to second-wave feminism as it portrays the oppression of women. Mama is shown to endure her husband's abuse, to the extent that she suffers several miscarriages, just so that she can be a good wife. According to Ibeku Ijeoma Ann, the *Purple Hibiscus* portrays two types of women. The first is Mama whom Ann refers to as the good woman, and Aunt Ifeoma, whom Ann refers to as the real woman. While Mama endured her husband's mistreatment to an extent where her life was endangered, Ifeoma was the type of woman who was not afraid to speak her mind (Ann Ibeku, p. 427). Towards the end, Mama becomes radical as she poisons her husband and is finally free of his abuse. The reader sees Kambili, Jaja, and Mama planning for a bright future together after Jaja is released from prison.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is an essential piece of feminist literature, especially when looked at through the lens of Second-Wave Feminism. The story follows a protagonist who along with her brother and mother is oppressed by her father. He abuses them behind closed doors if they don't behave as he requires. Eventually, the father passes away and the mother confesses to the children that it was she who poisoned him, thus overthrowing the abusive patriarchal force. In the end, we see the family together planning for a bright future ahead in the absence of their father. This story can be viewed through the lens of the second wave of feminism due to various reasons. The second wave of feminism took place in the 60s and the 70s after the two World Wars. In her famous work, the *Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan addresses this subject. She talks about how career prosperity is essential for women to feel good. She talked about how being a housewife should not be seen as a career for women and instead, women should be allowed education which would enable them to pursue careers just like men. Friedan believed that this was essential for women to feel fulfilled. She also believed that it is only when women attained education would they be able to escape the shackles of the oppressive patriarchy.

The Second Wave of Feminism was also deemed as the beginning of the Radical Feminism ideology as it was at this time that women realized that they were not just facing political discrimination but they were being oppressed. The first wave of feminism focused on suffrage but the second wave



focused on equality on all fronts, including social and economic as well as freedom from oppression by the patriarchy.

The *Purple Hibiscus* is a story of women who are oppressed and silenced by the patriarch of the family. They are abused by him and they are prohibited from expressing themselves and being who they actually are instead of being what is expected of them. This leads to them being silenced. The protagonist begins to open up and be herself once she is encouraged to do so. After visiting her aunt and seeing her children freely express themselves, she starts doing the same. Meanwhile, her mother takes a more radical approach and murders her husband by poisoning him. In the end, the women finally seem happy once the patriarch figure is gone and they can be and express themselves without being oppressed. The *Purple Hibiscus* is, therefore, a significant piece of literature that addresses the concepts of feminism.

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