

Between Resistance and Survival: Feminist and Womanist Consciousness in the Joys of Motherhood and Purple Hibiscus

Ms. Sanobar Haque

Research Scholar, English

Abstract:

Adichie and Emecheta stand in a large and stubborn queue of West African women authors who are dedicated to the feminist values and anchors of their rights. They write with care and precision for the women, highlight their misery, and advocate their voice. Human survival matters and so does female autonomy, but both of these are not a lonely project that has been cut from the social bonds.

These novels insist on cooperation, endurance, and on staying alive, together. The study not just traces the similarity of gender tropes in both the novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, but it also focuses on their differences. These writers do not come from the same background; belonging to different generations, they exhibit different pressures and urgencies.

The current study analyses the shared ethical commitments, especially in confronting the human suffering in general, with no turning away from the gender's point as well. It also pays equal attention to variation of how each of these two novelist images womanism in her own way. There is similar continuity of course in these writers but sometimes they frozen and shift, bends and grows.

Keywords: Feminist values, Rights, Gender tropes and Womanism

Feminism is often defined as women's conscious struggle against patriarchy, but this definition is not enough as patriarchy isn't an idea floating in the air. It is lived, practiced and rehearsed every day, without society noticing it. Men with few exceptions are generally benefited from it, so they decided to carry it without questioning, but sometimes quietly and unexpectedly they resist it as well. Njoku describes patriarchy as an ideology built on male dominance and superiority. But ideology alone doesn't explain its reach. Patriarchy is behaviour, a habit, structure, something one inherits before they even learn its name. Early feminist movements grew out of suffrage in Europe and America of voting rights being first and other rights afterwards. Later, feminist thought shifted direction toward the body, sexuality, and lived experience. The *Second Sex* (1949) marked a turning point and so did *Sexual Politics* (1970), which is a groundbreaking text but is also not without its limits.

These frameworks tended to universalize women's experience. They centred white, middle-class realities and in doing so, they erased others. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, this as "methodological universalism" which assumes all women share the same oppression, the same struggle with the same story. But women's lives are shaped by culture, class, race, and history, and hence African feminism begins in difference. It answers layered oppression in the form of racial, economic, political, and sexual all at once. It refuses Western romanticism of an ideal angel, full of virtues and witches consisting of vices. It is

practical and grounded and according to Emecheta, it does not shut men out rather accommodates them because men are part of the social fabric.

Filomina Chioma Steady describes African feminism as humanistic, concerned with total liberation but not only of women, but of communities. African women struggle against patriarchy but also against colonial residue, racial hierarchies, and economic exploitation that refuses to loosen its grip.

Unlike Western feminism, African feminism does not treat motherhood or tradition as automatically regressive. It rather interrogates and pushes them back, reclaims what can be reclaimed and rejects what harms, preserves and sustains thus, nothing is sacred by default or disposable either. African feminism values self-reliance, cooperation, and collective responsibility.

It challenges domination without demanding separation and recognises something crucial: African women have always resisted, negotiated and survived without a theory to name and perhaps, it's silent power.

In her essay "Representing the African Woman: Subjectivity and Self" in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Salome C. Nnoromele rejects the idea that Nnu Ego stands in for all African women. Instead, she asks uncomfortable questions about the representative of Nnu Ego, her suffering and ponders where that comes from, and if there is any space even small for personal growth.

These questions are deliberate. Nnoromele's point is simple, but sharp. *The Joys of Motherhood* does not offer a universal model of African motherhood. The character Nnu Ego is not the "typical" African woman. Instead, she is specific, historical, and trapped within particular expectations by refusing to settle for the visions of African womanhood.

In the novel she almost suffers a psychological upheaval. She focuses on being an ideal woman labeled by the society. These women are not born unstable; rather, they are pushed and pressurized by the societal expectation. Nnu Ego's first break comes after the death of her son Ngozi, which was a failure to her because society insists and reminds her that she, being a woman, cannot fulfil her reproductive duty.

That pressure never eases and her obedience turns into the cost of madness to the patriarchy, and her refusal of not performing womanhood, defines it. Even when she becomes a "successful mother", she disappears, where culture reshapes her and turns her into a symbolic male figure.

Further, Further Nnu Ego is haunted in the novel, not metaphorically, but spiritually. Her chi the slave Woman follows her everywhere. This haunting begins with her father, Agbadi, a patriarchal power that flows downward. However, she herself turned into the slave woman herself buried, silenced and carried across time dominated by patriarchy. It lodges itself inside the body and the spirit where social hierarchy ensures that women's survival is always fragile and always conditional.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, money does not dissolve patriarchy and wealth does not cancel tradition. Thus, Subordination survives prosperity and education. Race and gender return, but not neatly together. In "Buchi Emecheta and the African Dilemma", Louise O'Brien argues that Emecheta separates oppressions rather than collapsing them. Race and gender act differently in different times and spaces. Colonial Lagos is not rural Ibadan, and each location produces a different femininity.

O'Brien reads *The Joys of Motherhood* as exposing the misery of being a Black woman in a sexist and colonial society. Yet the novel resists simple judgment. It idealizes pre-colonial culture even as it acknowledges its patriarchy and critiques colonial modernity without fully returning to tradition.

In traditional culture, she is defined by men, father, husband, and sons, by sexuality and motherhood, but then a cracks appear. Masculinity and femininity shifts, for instance, Agbadi's hesitation over choosing her second husband signals this first rupture. Change enters quietly and nothing remains stable after that. Emecheta's womanist vision is best read through Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's framework. A

framework that refuses narrowness. It stretches beyond sexism, into politics, culture, economics, and even the nation itself. Womanism here is not rebellion it is rather an endurance not just of women along but of children as well.

In Emecheta's writing, one can see that although she challenges patriarchy through her writings, it remains stagnant, showing no change in the lives of the characters she represents. In contrast, Adichie's womanism does not challenge patriarchy and sexism alone; rather, it focuses on various other factors as well, such as race, culture, nation, economics, and politics.

Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is often described as a coming-of-age novel. The story is about a character named Kambili, about her life that surrounds her endurance. The novel is all about her fortitude from voicelessness to speech, and from fear to audacity. In the novel, with gradual involvement, her self-realization progresses and a sense of power stirs.

This development made her realise her status in the male dominated setting and pushed her to get herself free from it. Adichie does not describe freedom as being violent or rebellious, rather her characters negotiate, and adjust but sometimes this switching between obedience and protest makes them alive and engaging.

Machoism has not been given the back seat in the novel but rather it's been there as the main theme fully visible. The character of Eugene Achike and his rigid authority wrapped in religious fanaticism projects this very well. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie introduced Auntie Ifeoma, a sight of relief in the chaos and complications around defying patriarchal tyranny.

While there is sexist pressure, expectation, cultural, economic, and political stain on one gender, the womanist agenda is the shared responsibility and a healthy living of both the sexes. In the very first line of the novel, it proclaims that:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion.

This is not a neutral opening but a womanist statement of intent. The house is in a moment of tension and conflict depicting masculinist domination and control. Achike's power and authority are visible in the form of conflict. He remains at the center and the life of other members such as Beatrice, the children, and even his sister orbits around him.

He dominates and disciplines everyone, but with Jaja's firm, audacious, and unbelievable refusal, his control somehow begins to collapse. In Nsukka Auntie Ifeoma's house, her garden holds courage and ease. A sort of freedom where people talk and laugh freely and that is unfamiliar to the Achike children.

While lying awake in bed, Kambili recalls memories of the past. Those memories come slowly, careful and hesitant, and then Nsukka breaks those memories by intruding on them carefully, and things change not just for Jaja but for Kambili as well. Kambili, a timid girl, suddenly turns into a confident, contented woman, and her transformation is almost visible to everyone. Free from fear and doubt she again started to fill in a different way.

It is not sudden freedom, but something opens inside her, a small door perhaps. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie places almost all of her womanist anxieties right at the beginning of the novel. Packed tightly, the violence, silence, resistance, and possibility in the opening chapter, nothing remains random. The chapter title "Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday" carries a quiet kind of symbolism.

On that day Eugene Achike shatters the delicate figurine that comforts his wife. He uses a missal, a religious object turned weapon. Faith suddenly turned violent, the pieces scattered across the floor. Palm Sunday is supposed to be a day of hope, a collective moment. Palms raised, hymns sung, the promise of redemption hanging in the air, freedom imagined and oppression challenged and that is the story the ritual

tells but the Achike household does not follow the script. Jaja refuses communion, which is a small and quiet act that worked as a transformation in the house. The host was declined and with that he declined the false joy and the sacred orders distorted.

It is the first voice of liberation which will gradually move toward Jaja, toward Kambili, even toward Beatrice, and thus the silent bearing in the house begins to loosen and resistance starts to take its shape. Kambili's observation of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in the starting of the novel through womanist concern highlights the firm white Christian cultural authority in postcolonial Nigeria. Kambili's through her careful exposure exposes the hierarchy of the Church to the readers. The church preference for certain languages, rituals and a definite ways of being faithful depicts the Catholic authority's, a colonial baggage in a postcolonial state and hence, faith becomes the subject of control, something complicated as domination and not just simply a means of spiritual devotion and surrender.

Father Benedict makes this visible that this preference could not be read in isolation; rather, they are part of the larger structure. His insistence that Igbo is not holy enough and Latin stands more apt, sacred, pure, and even elevated in the church.

Igbo, being forced to edge, treated deficient, substandard and even undivine beneath something in power, and this hierarchy among language is not just something divinely ordained, rather a power structure where culture hegemony comes in guise of religion and faith. Father Benedict, through this strategy which is neither loud nor aggressive, prefunded this. His baseness in subtler ways, where people always think that this will remain unnoticed by the children.

However, Kambili being just sixteen years old lives almost unnoticeable and observes Achike's reaction. When Igbo songs were sung, Achike's aversive reaction among the masses was clearly visible. He called these songs, "native" in aversion such that his facial expression shifts, his straight-line lips turned down at the corners to form an inverted U, highlighting contempt and rejection.

Thus, through Achike Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie narrative points shows how soft hegemony remained even after the colonial power had completely ended, as this hegemony is carried through religious spaces by the native people, taming the life, existence, and attitude of ordinary people.

He prefers English not in nativized form with colloquial vocabulary and African accent, rather a more polished and refined form. In contrast to African native expression, English appeared to him as a sort of sacred sanctity revered by him deeply.

Achike's aversion when Father Amadi sings Igbo songs during his sermons and commands his family for him is that he has been turned away from the straight path of God. Achike's beliefs that whiteness carries the whites' burden and is divinely ordained to refine the non-whites, and in doing so, it is completely justified to erase or modify the native African cultural identity.

Adichie avoids dramatic speeches or direct accusation; rather, she projects this through Kambili's quiet narrative, through glances and observations revealing history at large. A teenage girl observes this quill and economic power complicates this structure even more. It slips into everything quietly sometimes and loudly at others. Kambili begins to understand this through her father's wealth.

Eugene Achike is not just a devout Catholic man. He is also a powerful businessman. Factories belonging to him, wafer factories, drink companies, newspapers, and other ventures too. His money moves across the country, visible and invisible at the same time. He gives a lot of it away, which is appreciated by everyone.

His donations to the church, contributions to charities, money handed to individuals who come asking for help, which sometimes he gives openly, smiling, shaking hands; other times the giving happens quietly in

an anonymous envelopes and unnamed benefactors, but people already know who is behind this.

This wealth gives him influence everywhere whether in the church or in the wider society, back in his hometown and even inside his own house. Money travels far, and with it, its power. People praise him endlessly. They call him Omelora, the One Who Does for the Community. The name follows him like a title, almost like a crown.

His generosity from outside looks something as glorious as something indescribable, but it unfolds something as strong as domination and control. Father Benedict helped Achike's kindness maintain by speaking through the pulpit. He highlights his charity to Peter's Pence, contributions to St. Vincent de Paul, money donated for public welfare in the hospitals, to convents, and to church buildings under construction.

Although everyone knows the story behind, still the congregation listens politely. The bribes are paid in the form of cheques in the envelope quietly and secretly to the judges, policemen, and prison guards controlling power with money.

Beatrice poisoning of Eugene marks the final resistance against patriarchy in the form his imposed rigid religious tyrannies, and psychological abuses to these females.

Adichie throughout her writing depicts Nigeria's political climate, where political events and news bulletins are not the events of distance rather an experience of an ordinary life of the common people affecting their day-to-day to day survival and in this case, Achike's life too is affected by these tremors as his loved ones, family, business, and newspaper somehow stained.

From a womanist point of view, this order challenges the government and societal harmony that are at stake. Adichie, concerned through narrative, depicts this very well. The opening chapter of the *Purple Hibiscus* questions the concept of power in the context of government offices, churches, or inside the families, having womanist concerns at the top. The journey for Jaja and Kambili depicts healing and surviving after years of endless traumas.

Adichie's writings never treat patriarchy as something to be read as of some classroom text, rather a lived experience of a day-to-day survival. Eugene Achike and his wife, Beatrice, depicted sexism not just as an abstract entity but rather as an ordinary endeavor.

It becomes routine, something that lived, repeated and normalised. This part of the narrative lingers on Achike's oppression of Beatrice and on the many ways women respond to it, but not all responses look the same. Some women endure, some resist, and some survive simply by holding on to each other. And that, perhaps, is where Adichie's womanist commitment becomes most visible.

Sexism here is not accidental. Women are not mistreated because they fail at something. They are mistreated because they are women. The novel returns to this truth again and again almost stubbornly, refusing to soften it. Three threads run through this portrayal.

First in the form of Achike's rigid masculinity which is authoritarian, unyielding and almost sacred in its own mind, strengthened by religion and by wealth. Second, the resistance offered by women like Beatrice and Ifeoma, which might be sometimes loud and sometimes quiet and subtle, almost invisible. Then there is the third thread, a kind of female bonding which is not dramatic or heroic in the usual sense, but just women recognising each other's pain, sharing it, and sitting beside, holding it for a moment when the other cannot. Thus, Adichie's vision of feminists is painful and not just an ordinary toil of resistance.

Work Cited

1. Acheampong, Kelvin. "The Quest for Epistemic Freedom in African Feminist Theorizing." *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2025.2521974>.
2. Barfia, Zahra, and Sarieh Alaei. "Western Feminist Consciousness in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*." *International Letters of Social and Humanistic Sciences*, vol. 42, SciPress Ltd., 2015, pp. 12–20. <https://doi.org/10.18052/www.scipress.com/ILSHS.42.12>.
3. Begum, Syed Hajira. "Deconstruction of Gender Identities: A Study of the Novels of Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie." *Journal of English Language and Literature (JOELL)*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016.
4. Ben Mohammed, Noura, and Sonia Matmar. "Traditions, Polygamy and Education in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979)." Université Mouloud Mammeri de Tizi-Ouzou, Département d'Anglais, Faculté des Lettres et des Langues, Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche Scientifique, <https://dspace.ummo.dz/server/api/core/bitstreams/7e03a0ce-1280-4ff9-90f5-acde5a9c2198/content>.
5. Camminga, B. "Disregard and Danger: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voices of Trans (and Cis) African Feminists." *The Sociological Review*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2020, pp. 817–833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120934695>.
6. Çela, Eriada. "Gender and Citizenship Models: Reflections from Feminist Literature." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 6, no. 2, suppl. 5, Apr. 2015, pp. 109–14. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ebe7/0588929f746d6929854ee7fc098eed9a18b3.pdf>.
7. Dawson, Ashley. *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*. University of Michigan Press, 2007.
8. Farida, J., and Vidya Dass. "Deconstructing Gender Inequality: A Critical Analysis of Buchi Emecheta's Select Novels." *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, vol. 6, no. 6, Nov.–Dec. 2024, pp. 1–9.
9. Fischer, Mia. "Trans Responses to Adichie: Challenging Cis Privilege in Popular Feminism." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2017, pp. 896–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1350520>.
10. Ghosh, Sukanya, and A. A. Khan. "Buchi Emecheta and the Exploration of Gender and Identity in African Literature." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 1, no. 1, Feb. 2013, pp. 1–8. www.ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT1135835.pdf.
11. Gilani, Syed Sumaira. "Appropriating Womanist Theory: A Deconstructionist Reading of Women's Identity in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Purple Hibiscus*." *International Conference on Recent Trends in Humanities, Education, Arts, Culture, Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Religion, Gender and Management Studies (HEALM-2019)*, 2019, pp. 33–37.
12. Hoving, Isabel, et al., editors. *Africa and Its Significant Others: Forty Years of Cultural Entanglement*. Editions Rodopi B.V., 2003.
13. Iqbal, Afroz. "Black Feminism in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Joys of Motherhood*." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*.
14. Jadhav, Ganesh Shankarrao. "*We Should All Be Feminists*: The Manifesto of New Feminism." *International Journal of Advance and Applied Research*, vol. 2, no. 9, 2022. https://d1wqtxtslxzle7.cloudfront.net/122186586/WE_SHOULD_ALL_BE_FEMINISTS_THE_MANIFESTO_OF_NEW_FEMINISM-libre.pdf.
15. Lascelles, Amber. "We Should All Be Radical Feminists: A Review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Contribution to Literature and Feminism." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 57, no. 6, 2021, pp.

- 893–899. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2021.1900414>.
16. Maoui, Hocine, and Amari Ourida. “Buchi Emecheta, A Feminist With a Small ‘f’ or a Motherist With a Big ‘m’?” *Revue Algérienne des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques*, vol. 17, no. 3, 31 Dec. 2021, pp. 224–43. <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/187537>.
17. Monthabeng, Makgwale Hassel, Malesela Edward Montle, and Mphoto Johannes Mogoboya. “The Representation of African Traditional Women in African Literature: A Feminist Study of Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*.” *Language Circle: Journal of Language and Literature*, vol. 17, no. 1, Oct. 2022, pp. 98–107.
18. Mughal, Muneeba, et al. “Feminist Interventions in Motherhood Discourse: A Comparative Study of *Moth Smoke* and *The Joys of Motherhood* from a Radical Feminist Perspective.” *University of Chitral Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, www.jll.uoch.edu.pk/index.php/jll/article/view/310.
19. Nadaswaran, Shalini. “The Legacy of Buchi Emecheta in Nigerian Women’s Fiction.” *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, vol. 2, no. 2, Mar. 2012, pp. 110–114.
20. Nash, Kate. “Feminism and Contemporary Liberal Citizenship: The Undecidability of ‘Women.’” *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2001, pp. 255–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020120085234>.
21. O’Brien, Louise. “Buchi Emecheta and the ‘African Dilemma.’” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2001, pp. 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198940103600208>.
22. Oliveira, Emilia Barone. “Is There Joy? – Double Colonization in *The Joys of Motherhood* of Buchi Emecheta.” Diva Portal, www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1881210/FULLTEXT01.pdf.
23. Olufunwa, Harry. “Earning a Life: Women and Work in the Fiction of Buchi Emecheta.” University of Lagos, ResearchGate, www.researchgate.net/publication/261710577_Earning_a_Life_Women_and_Work_in_the_Fiction_of_Buchi_Emecheta.
24. Olúgúnlẹ̀, Wolé. “Power Relationship and Female Experience in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta, Bayo Adebowale and Ramonu Sanusi.” *Literature, Language and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Ramonu Sanusi*, University of Ibadan.
25. Oso, Olusola. “The Treatment of Patriarchy in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*.” *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2017, pp. 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3968/9859>.
26. Porter, Abioseh Michael. “*Second Class Citizen*: The Point of Departure for Understanding Buchi Emecheta’s Major Fiction.” *Ifri: Journal of the Humanities*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2006, pp. 1–12.
27. Robolin, Stephane. “Gendered Hauntings: *The Joys of Motherhood*, Interpretive Acts, and Postcolonial Theory.” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 35, no. 3, Fall 2004, pp. 76–92.
28. Roy, Srijanee. “Negotiating Nigerian Motherhood: A Study of Resistance and Subversion in Buchi Emecheta’s Novels.” *IIS University Journal of Arts*, vol. 12, nos. 3–4, 2023, pp. 334–343.
29. Sarjawan, Dian Ayu. “A Feminist Analysis of Gender Roles in *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.” *JISH: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Humaniora*, vol. 1, no. 1, Mar. 2025.
30. Sindhu, T., and Suresh Frederick. “Representation of the Sorrow of Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*.” *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*.
31. Umeh, Marie A. “The Joys of Motherhood: Myth or Reality?” *Colby Library Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 1, Mar. 1982, pp. 39–46.

32. Unnithan, A. Karthika, and Harini Jayaraman. “Entwining the Omenala and Samskara: An Indo-Nigerian Ethnographic Study of Buchi Emecheta’s Fiction.” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018.
33. Zulfqar, Sadia. “‘Sharing a Husband’: The Representation of Polygamy in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).” *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 52, no. 4, Winter 2022.