

# INTERSECTIONAL FEMALE OPPRESSION IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE PURPLE HIBISCUS

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(Received 14<sup>th</sup> January 2025; revised 19<sup>th</sup> April 2025; accepted 28<sup>th</sup> April 2025)

**Abstract.** This paper seeks to interpret the concept of intersectional female oppression as depicted in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus of 2003. The novel revolves around Achike's family and addresses the theme of violence, oppression, gender and freedom which led to it receiving the Hurston-Wright legacy award in 2004 and Commonwealth writers' price in 2005. Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality on female oppression and the way it distinguishes itself from other approaches on female oppression offers a useful framework to examine and understand the multifaceted and interconnected nature in the representation of female oppression. According to Crenshaw, intersectional oppression describes how black women experience compounded oppression from racism, sexism and gender which expounds the connected chains of oppression and exposes the disadvantages of addressing the unique struggles of women when their oppressions are interpreted from a discrete perspective. This paper aims to examine how different forms of violence and injustice interact to oppress the female characters based on their intersecting identities in Purple Hibiscus bringing to light the connected web of female oppression. While discovering different structures that triggered female oppression in a patriarchal society, this study also found that the oppressed female characters transitioned from silence to resistance, gaining empowerment and transforming their lives through their experiences.

**Keywords:** *intersectional female oppression, female identity, patriarchal society, female empowerment, Purple Hibiscus*

## Introduction

Violence against women is not new and the origin of female intersectional oppression lies in the historical interplay of patriarchy, colonialism, racism, capitalism, and other systems of domination that have shaped the subjugation of women through overlapping and interlocking forms of discrimination. Tracing its origins involves examining key moments, ideologies, and social structures that have institutionalized this oppression over time. According to Fox (2013), oppression against women is rooted in the religious, historical and biological interpretations of the role women in the family and society, which as a result determined the patriarchal system. In ancient civilizations like Egypt, Greece, and Rome, women were subordinated to men through patriarchal norms that inflicted physical, ritual and psychological violence on women (Das Candeias Sales, 2018). These societies, especially in the Arab world, institutionalized gender hierarchies, with women often confined to domestic roles and denied access to education, property ownership, and political power (Almosaed, 2004). Class divisions in early societies added another layer to female oppression. For example, elite women had some privileges compared to lower-class women, but both groups were largely excluded from public decision-making. Religion was also used to justify racial and ethnic oppression. For instance, European colonial powers invoked religious superiority to control Indigenous and African women, imposing both racial

and gendered subjugation. Many religious traditions codified female subjugation. For example, in some interpretations of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, women were seen as inherently subordinate to men, and their primary roles were defined as wives and mothers (Parsitau and Aura, 2021). European colonialism (15<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries) introduced systems that marginalized women of colour, especially indigenous African women (Unnumen, 2005), first as women and second as members of “the newly conquered deviant group” (Fox, 2013). The rise of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries intensified gender and class oppression. Working-class women, especially those from marginalized racial or ethnic backgrounds, were relegated to low-paying, exploitative jobs, often in factories or as domestic workers (Foster and Clark, 2018).

The treatment of Female oppression in Nigerian fiction has evolved significantly over time, with early works primarily focusing on gender oppression and gradually incorporating more complex intersections of race, class, and ethnic identity. This shift reflects broader societal changes and the increasing recognition of the need for nuanced depictions of women's experiences in Nigerian society. In the colonial and early post-colonial periods, Nigerian fiction often depicted women's struggles within patriarchal frameworks, focusing on issues like marriage, domestic roles, and the social restrictions placed on women. Early male writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa'rhiongo, Cyprain Ekwensi, and Ben Okri often portray female characters within these patriarchal structures, but they do not delve deeply into the intersection of gender with other forms of oppression. It was not until female writers like Buchi Emecheta emerged that these issues were explored more critically, with her works such as *The Joys of Motherhood* in 1979 highlighting the compounded nature of women's struggles within both familial and societal contexts. Emecheta (1994) exploration of the intersection between gender and class shows how poverty, along with gender expectations, severely limits the choices of Nigerian women. Adichie (2012; 2006) further expanded this exploration in works like *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003 and *Half of a Yellow Sun* in 2006, where the intersection of personal, familial, and political oppression becomes central to the narrative. Adichie's characters often struggle not only with patriarchal norms but also with the oppressive political systems in place. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili's journey is shaped by both her father's authoritarian rule over the family and the broader political turmoil in Nigeria. These layers of oppression reflect the ways that colonial legacies and ongoing political instability intersect with gender dynamics, making it impossible to separate the personal from the political.

The contemporary Nigerian feminist novel has become more attuned to the complexities of intersectionality, especially in urban and post-colonial contexts. In this sense, the narrative structures of these novels increasingly incorporate critiques of class, ethnicity, and race, often pointing to how these forms of oppression intersect with traditional gender roles. For instance, novels like *Everything Good Will Come* in 2005 (Atta, 2005) and *Yellow-Yellow* in 2006 (Agary, 2006) depict women navigating not only patriarchal violence but also the economic and environmental impacts of capitalist exploitation in the Niger Delta. These works highlight how environmental degradation, caused by oil extraction, intersects with gender oppression to exacerbate the struggles of women in these regions. In more recent works, the intersectionality of oppression is addressed more explicitly, especially in relation to contemporary issues like corruption, domestic violence, and the rise of global capitalism. For example, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* (2018) portrays how societal expectations of femininity, coupled with a corrupt and violent patriarchy, shape the lives of women (Braithwaite, 2018). The novel

critiques how women are often forced into roles defined by male desires and societal expectations, and it demonstrates the impact of both gender-based and societal violence on women's agency and choices. Nigerian women writers have played a critical role in shifting the narrative, moving beyond the portrayal of individual gender struggles to focus on the complex, interwoven forms of oppression that shape women's experiences in Nigerian society. Just like Adichie whose work (*Purple Hibiscus*) not only critiques these oppressive structures but also offer a vision for resistance and empowerment. In *Purple Hibiscus* in 2003, the narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a tumultuous Nigerian society, where the forces of political, social, and familial oppression collide. The novel is a piercing exploration of violence, not just as a physical act but as a systemic force that shapes the lives of its characters. At the heart of this violence is Eugene (Papa), a domineering father whose brutal actions transcend the domestic sphere, spilling over into the public and political realms. His authoritarian rule at home mirrors the repressive political climate of Nigeria, where the desires for freedom and justice are constantly quashed. Through the lens of Kambili, the protagonist, we witness a vivid portrayal of the intersection of personal trauma and broader societal injustices. The insidious nature of violence in *Purple Hibiscus* is in how it becomes institutionalized-within the family, the church, and the state. Adichie offers a nuanced examination of how such violence against women-particularly mothers and daughters-reflects the deep-seated patriarchal structures that not only control but also silence their voices. Hence, this study aims to unveil the complexity of the female characters struggles and experiences, especially when it has to deal with the different forms of oppressive structure that intersect to shape their identity.

### ***Literature review***

Most African literature often portrays the struggles and challenging times that African women confront due to patriarchal ideologies, colonial legacies like the issue of class and bad government and societal expectations of the female gender. Literary writers and critics have unearthed the representations of women in Nigerian literature through diverse theoretical and conceptual approaches. Critics of African and Nigerian literature, specifically, have constantly explored the depictions of women's oppression, within diverse patriarchal structures in African literature. Prominent among the ideological approaches is feminism which is commonly contrasted with womanism. Feminism is a radical form of repudiating patriarchal domination of women which is perceived as a "European import" (Andrade, 201), while womanism is rather temperate, conservative, and cultural-specific (Okafor, 2018; Dlamini, 2013). Numerous critical studies on African literature have examined the contest between these ideologies and their impact on interrogating female oppression. To buttress the argument that surrounds women's oppression in African literature, one needs to trace the early African writings that reflect the interests of the male members of the African literati because of gender discrimination and their early exposure to education. Most early literary narratives portray male members of the African intelligentsia as 'heroes'. Example of this assertion is seen in Obi in *No Longer at Ease* in 1960, Camara in *The African Child* in 1953, Odili in *A Man of the People* in 1966, as well as Waiyaki in *The River Between* in 1965, among others. In all these novels of the time, women play subordinate roles in society's affairs and most of the principal female characters were portrayed as companions and adjuncts to the main male characters (Amala, 2020).

Ada (2011) avers that physical and psychological abuse of women is still prevalent. She illustrates this by using Beatrice in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Ama's mother in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* which represent women who are abused in marriages but remain in such marriages because of perceived insecurity that sequels divorce. Two sets of women are represented in Nigerian literature: the first set accepts patriarchal oppression and is silent, such examples are amply represented in the characterology of Ariola in Atta (2005) *Everything Good Will Come*, while the second set rejects patriarchal oppression, like Bolanle in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* in 2010. Ada (2011) conceives contemporary Nigerian gynotexts as feminists and concludes that African women are yet to attain full freedom from male subjugation and oppression, hence their experiences of oppression intersect and intensifies. Dosekun (2023) assertion that intersectionality is underexplored in feminist hashtag campaigns in Nigeria cuts across various African critical discourses. Dosekun avers that, structures such as gender, age, education, class, sexuality, and many more intersect to oppress a Nigerian woman. Okpokwasili and Dukor (2023) reveals that entrenched patriarchal norms, limited access to quality education and healthcare, disproportionate rates of violence against women, and unequal representation in political and economic spaces are social structures that intersect to oppress women and certain groups of men. She uses Bell Hook's interlocking web that is intertwined with intersectionality to reveal the multiple oppressions that different individuals grapple with in Nigeria and asserts that these structural forms of subjugation "widen the gender gaps and impede positive gender relations".

Muhammad (2020) deploys intersectionality to explore how poetry published by Northern Nigerian women embodies the multiple structural oppressions that women in Northern Nigeria wrestle with such as gender, class, ethnicity, and region. However, his analysis merely glosses over the topical issues of women's oppression without defining the model of intersectionality being used and how the poets coalesce the social structures that subordinate women. In other critical works on Nigerian literature (Chakraborty, 2023; Murthy, 2019), scholars nominally deploy intersectionality without harnessing its methods in their textual analyses. Intersectionality is also mobilised to interrogate the depiction of overlapping multiple identities in Nigerian literature. Olondo (2020) unfurls the depiction of intersectional identities in Igoni Barrett's *Blackass* and how whiteness intersects with other forms of identity like gender, class, and sexuality. Olondo contends that Barrett subverts the stereotypical perception of identities and depicts the irony of intersecting whiteness (race) with poverty in postcolonial Nigeria. Saritha (2017) unravels a parallel identity analytic mode in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* connects it to the intersectional oppression of race and gender that Ada suffers in Britain. The literature signifies two methods in the utilization of intersectionality for appraising Nigerian literature: first is the focus on women's oppression through intersectional approach which is still generally understudied, whereas the second prioritizes general identity inquiry or the combining of identity and specifically gender (oppressive male and female) issues. I will adopt the first method in this study. The under-exploration of intersectional oppression of Nigerian females in Nigerian literary critical discourse can be attributed to probable intentional critical acts to overlook the dimensions of literary texts that do not align with a particular ideological goal of individuality and secular collectivity. Therefore, this study explores the intersectionality of women's oppression to signify how African

writers have narrativized the multifaceted oppression women experience that shape their identities through Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of 'intersectionality'.

## Materials and Methods

This study is aimed at addressing the intersectionality of women oppression by focussing on the different forms of oppressive structure that systemically marginalise and silence women. Intersectionality emanated from feminism as a consequence of feminism's alleged neglect of the minorities such as women of colour. Carastathis (2016) traces the origin of intersectionality to Crenshaw and avers that Crenshaw's work "inherits a much longer history of Black feminist thought traced to the nineteenth-century". Carastathis laments that as intersectionality becomes mainstream, much of Crenshaw's revelation about oppression has been forgotten because the term is generally and vaguely appropriated. She advocates the rediscovery of intersectionality as a concept that amplifies visible categorical exclusion "but cannot remedy it at the level of representation" and posits a mode that contests rather than a frame that reproduces these categories of oppression. The author observe that Carastathis implores critics to apprehend the nuances that underlie intersectionality rather than the surface, essentialist categories that we gloss over in our analysis and asserts that critics should pay attention to the basement metaphor (that at the lowest rung). The author will analyse how these unsettling categories connect to women's location and foster intersectional oppression as represented in the novel. Intersectionality has been criticised as foregrounding "race and gender over class, caste, and antisemitism" (Dhawan and Varela, 2023), especially by Indian and European feminists. Intersectionality is denounced for entrenching Euro-American scholarship, undermining specific inequalities that are more important than others, disregarding nuances like indigeneity, and neglecting antisemitism. Menon (2015) also denounces intersectionality for not recognising the complexity of "women", for the tendency to universalise its Global North concepts, and for the power of international funding (the UN) that promotes its circulation. She opines that intersectionality is the formalisation of "double and triple burdens". In her argument on women in India, she identifies "a particular caste location that includes women". Although Menon's argument on the dominance of Eurocentric theory is germane, her identification of the "location of women" in the caste system for resisting reserving spaces for women in parliament parallels Crenshaw's conceptual intervention. It signifies the tendency of women to marginalise women which Crenshaw identifies in mainstream feminism. Menon also remonstrates Crenshaw for turning the law for recognising minority identities and describes it as "a failed project to turn to it to reflect our own complex ethical positions" which I disagree with. Crenshaw deploys the law in the US to elucidate the complicity of different social structures in oppressing women.

However, the author read Crenshaw (2013a; 2013b) utilisation of race and gender in her intersectional formulations as variables that can be supplanted based on the location of the analysts. Crenshaw uses location, or the "telling of location", to investigate the social structures that affect her social context in the US, the location of Black females at the basement of the social ladder of feminism and antiracism, which translates to location informing the variables. The author do not consider Crenshaw's use of gender and race as fossilised variables for interrogating intersectional oppressions that women suffer. The variables she harnessed are based on her social location which translates to

the fluidity of constructing analytic variables based on social location. For example, race as a category does not apply to Nigeria, but other variables like religion are essential which solves “the conditions of non-reciprocity between the Global North and South” that Dhawan and Varela advocate. Crenshaw argues that “feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women” present them as mutually exclusive. Conversely, these experiences are not mutually exclusive in social reality and necessitate exploring an interpretive strategy that recognises the coalescing of these social structures in women’s oppression. Although feminism perceives female oppression from discrete perspectives, intersectionality furthers the argument by crystalising how different social structures collaborate subliminally in oppressing females. Hence, Crenshaw’s intersectionality is employed to this study to examine the intersectional oppression women experience as depicted in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus in 2003 through close reading of the text to highlight and analyse the multiple dimensional violence that oppress women in the society.

Crenshaw states that some conceptions about oppression of women construct subordination as a “Single categorical axis” and obscure the multiple-burden of black women especially in feminist theory. She advocates for an intersectional approach that challenges the single-issue analyses of women oppression. Therefore, this study examines Kambili, Beatrice, Anty Ifeoma and other female characters to reveal the layers of intersectional oppression faced by women, particularly in their relationship with men who wield their power over them in different forms. For example, the violence the protagonist ‘Kambili’ experienced in her home is not an isolated incident but part of a larger societal mechanism that marginalizes women’s voices and autonomy. Her mother's silence, a result of years of psychological and physical abuse, is a manifestation of the broader societal tendency to suppress women, particularly in cultures that hold religious orthodoxy and patriarchal traditions in high regard. The physical scars left by Eugene on his wife and children are only one part of the story; the emotional and psychological damage is more insidious, highlighting the cruelty of an oppressive system that disregards the emotional and bodily autonomy of women. Adichie’s portrayal of women in the novel is one of both suffering and quiet strength, offering a profound commentary on the intersectionality of gendered violence, class, and political power.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Domestic violence and religious oppression***

Beatrice (Mama) epitomizes the plight of women trapped in abusive marriages due to societal, religious, and economic constraints. Her husband, Eugene, a devout Catholic, exerts control over her through brutal physical violence, emotional abuse, and psychological manipulation. Eugene’s violence is both literal and symbolic, as he sees himself as a righteous enforcer of moral and religious order, a practice he learnt from a reverend father at St. Gregory’s as a teenager. This violence is vividly depicted when Beatrice recounts how Eugene broke a sturdy table on her belly during a pregnancy: “You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly... My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it”. Adichie uses Beatrice’s miscarriages as a metaphor for the physical and emotional toll of domestic violence. Eugene’s beatings lead to at least two documented miscarriages, a fact that Beatrice tells

Ifeoma: “I was six weeks gone... Eugene did not know, I had not yet told him”. This understated admission reflects how deeply ingrained her silence has become, she minimizes her suffering because patriarchal society normalizes such violence. Religion further compounds her oppression, as Eugene’s fervent Catholicism frames him as morally superior, absolving him of guilt and discouraging Beatrice from seeking escape. His rigid belief system creates a hierarchy where women are inherently subordinate, expected to obey and accept suffering as part of their spiritual duty.

Kambili, the narrator, suffers under the oppressive control of her father, who weaponizes religion to enforce authoritarian discipline. Eugene’s strict adherence to Catholicism stifles Kambili’s self-expression and individuality. For example, Kambili recalls how she was forced to sit rigidly during Mass, suppressing any emotions that might betray pride: “I would sit with my knees pressed together, next to Jaja, trying hard to keep my face blank, to keep the pride from showing, because Papa said modesty was very important”. Again, when Eugene and Kambili visit a bishop, he gets mad at her for not showing respect to the bishop: “So, a few days later, when we went to see the bishop at Awka, I did not kneel to kiss his ring. I wanted to make Papa proud. But Papa yanked my ear in the car and said I did not have the spirit of discernment: the bishop was a man of God”. Kambili’s experiences of religious oppression are also epitomized in the incident where she eats “ten minutes before mass” and faces severe punishment from Eugene with “a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle”. This episode highlights the extreme rigidity of Eugene’s interpretation of Catholicism and its oppressive impact on Kambili’s physical and emotional wellbeing. Eugene also estranges his children from their grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, whom he views as a pagan for being a traditionalist. He reluctantly allows them to visit the old man whenever they travel to the village, and when Papa-Nnukwu become gravely ill and is brought to Nsukka by Ifeoma during Jaja and Kambili’s holiday there, he punishes them for “sleeping in the same house as a heathen”. Kambili’s life is further constrained by her father’s inordinate expectations of perfection. Eugene demands that she always come first in her class and punishes any perceived failure. This weight of expectation is described as suffocating: “It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand”.

### ***Systematic and socioeconomic oppression***

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the multifaceted nature of systemic and socioeconomic oppression through the experiences of women like Auntie Ifeoma, Beatrice, and Kambili. Auntie Ifeoma’s narrative reflects the challenges of systemic barriers, particularly in the professional and socioeconomic spheres. As a widow and junior university lecturer, she battles financial instability, systemic sexism, and the intersectional oppression of widowhood in a patriarchal society. Despite her education and independence, Ifeoma’s struggles are compounded by the failing state infrastructure under military rule, which disrupts her ability to provide for her family. She describes her challenges: “We have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka... We just called off yet another strike, even though no lecturer has been paid for the last two months”. The systemic sexism in academia manifests in delayed promotions and financial insecurity. Ifeoma’s male colleagues are often promoted or better paid, while her efforts are undervalued. Her female friend Chiaku warns her about the consequences of her outspoken nature: “they said there is a list circulating, Ifeoma, of lecturers who are

disloyal to the university. They said they might be fired. They said your name is on it". Her son Obiora captures the situation aptly: "The university's equivalent of a head of state.... The university becomes a microcosm of the country.... Do you know how long they have been sitting on her file? .... She should have been senior lecturer years ago". Even her physical environment reflects systemic failure. The poor state of the university quarters is symbolized by the chants of student protesters: "Sole administrator must go. He doesn't wear pant oh! Head of State must go. He doesn't wear pant oh! Where is running water? Where is light? Where is petrol?".

Despite these challenges, Ifeoma's resilience and independence serve as a counter-narrative to female oppression, though they also highlight the steep cost of defying societal norms. In contrast, Beatrice's oppression is rooted in domestic and economic dependence on Eugene. She is entirely reliant on him for financial support, making it nearly impossible for her to leave her abusive marriage. Even to visit Kambili and Jaja at Ifeoma's home, she must take "Eugene's money... to hire a taxi and come here". This economic dependence forces Beatrice to adopt survival strategies, such as maintaining the facade of a loving wife in public, despite the abuse she endures. Adichie critiques this normalization of female suffering, showing how Beatrice's silence and submission are acts of survival in a patriarchal system. Kambili's oppression extends beyond the domestic sphere to the broader societal context. She observes the systemic marginalization of women and girls, particularly in the market scene where soldiers violently oppress women: "As we hurried past, I saw a woman spit at a soldier, I saw the soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It curled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulder. Another soldier was kicking down trays of fruits, squashing papayas with his boots and laughing". These events expose Kambili to the pervasive nature of female oppression in society, linking her personal struggles to systemic violence against women. Adichie also critiques how poverty and gender intersect to deny girls access to education. Kambili observes young girls forced into child labor instead of attending school: "Hawkers, girls much younger than I, defied the school gate men, edging closer and closer to the cars to offer peeled oranges and bananas and groundnuts, their moth-eaten blouses slipping off their shoulders". This depiction highlights how systemic inequalities trap women and girls in cycles of marginalization. Through Auntie Ifeoma's struggles, Beatrice's dependence, and Kambili's observations, Adichie critiques the systemic barriers that perpetuate female oppression. By intertwining personal narratives with broader societal issues, she reveals how gender, class, and systemic corruption intersect to disproportionately affect women.

### ***Gender, cultural and patriarchal oppression***

Adichie critiques the cultural norms that sustain patriarchal authority and female subjugation. In Igbo society, as depicted in the novel, women are often valued primarily for their roles as wives and mothers. This cultural expectation limits their autonomy and reinforces their oppression. For example, Beatrice endures years of abuse partly because leaving her marriage would bring shame to her family. Similarly, Ifeoma is criticized by her extended family for being too independent after her husband's death. These cultural pressures illustrate how societal norms intersect with gender to marginalize women. Patriarchal authority is also deeply ingrained in the family structure, where male figures wield absolute control. Eugene embodies this authority, using religion and tradition to justify his dominance over Beatrice, Kambili, and Jaja. His control extends beyond his household to the wider community, where he is revered as a moral and spiritual leader.

This reverence shields him from accountability, allowing his oppressive behavior to persist unchallenged. Adichie's portrayal of Eugene underscores the danger of unchecked patriarchal power, particularly when it is legitimized by cultural and religious institutions. Culturally, Ifeoma faces scrutiny as a widow, in addition to the oppression she endures in the academia. In traditional Igbo society, widowhood often relegates women to a position of social invisibility or stigma. She faces scrutiny from her late husband's kinsmen and kinswomen, known as *umunna* in Igbo, who accuse her of hiding money or orchestrating his death: "One of the women from their compound even told me I had killed him... why waste my time? They all have the brains of guinea fowls". Ifeoma wonders "how Ifediora came from an *umunna* like that". Beatrice captures the real picture of the oppression when she remarks that "Umunna will always say hurtful things".

Ifeoma, however, refuses to be marginalized, challenging societal norms by prioritizing her children's education and encouraging them to think critically. Her resistance to patriarchal norms offers a stark contrast to Beatrice's submission, yet her struggles reveal that independence does not exempt women from systemic oppression. Beatrice, in turn, embodies the cultural expectation that women should endure such abuse in silence to preserve the sanctity of marriage and family. In addition to her husband's brutality, Beatrice also faces societal condemnation for not bearing more children. She recalls the whispers from the *umunna*, urging Eugene to take another wife thus: "Because a man of his stature cannot have just two children". She tells Kambili: "You know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our *umunna* even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates, too. They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr. Ezendu's second wife did. But your father stayed with me, with us". According to her, "They even said somebody had tied up my womb with *ogwu*". This pressure highlights the intersection of gender and cultural expectations, where a woman's worth is tied to her ability to bear sons, further compounding Beatrice's oppression. Despite this, Beatrice's eventual poisoning of Eugene becomes a desperate act of resistance against years of silencing and subjugation, challenging the cultural narrative that women must always endure abuse.

### ***Psychological oppression and trauma***

The psychological toll of oppression is a recurring theme in *Purple Hibiscus*, vividly depicted through Kambili's experiences and internal struggles. Her nightmares and mental anguish serve as a testament to the deep scars left by systemic and interpersonal oppression. The trauma inflicted by Eugene's punishments continues to haunt her even after his death: "I have nightmares about the other kind, the silence of when Papa was alive... it forms blue tongues of fire that rest above my head, like Pentecost, until I wake up screaming". This demonstrates how oppression's effects extend beyond the physical, creating long-lasting psychological damage and emphasizing the need for holistic healing and liberation. The imagery of oppression also manifests in Kambili's persistent memory of a woman beaten by soldiers. This haunting vision underscores her sensitivity to human suffering and the psychological burden it places on her: "I thought about the woman lying in the dirt as we drove home. I had not seen her face, but I felt that I knew her, that I had always known her. I wished I could have gone over and helped her up, cleaned the red mud from her wrapper... I thought about her, too, on Monday, as Papa

drove me to school”. The image remains so powerful that it reappears in Kambili's mind when she sees another suffering person: “I watched him in the rear-view mirror, my eyes steadily on him, until he disappeared from sight. He reminded me of the market woman in the dirt. There was a helplessness to his joy, the same kind of helplessness as in that woman’s despair”.

Even the potential for failure subjects Kambili to emotional torture. The fear of not meeting her father’s impossible standards weighs on her so heavily that she wishes for oblivion: “I wanted the ground to open up and swallow the whole compound”. Papa’s inordinate expectations create a psychological burden that Kambili carries with her constantly. He demands perfection, tying her self-worth to academic achievement: “Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges. Because God has given you much, he expects much from you. He expects perfection”. For Kambili, this expectation becomes an unbearable load as she recounts thus: “I remained a backyard snob to most of my class girls until the end of term. But I did not worry too much about that because I carried a bigger load—the worry of making sure I came first this term. It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand”. Papa’s control extends beyond academics, demanding swift obedience in all aspects of Kambili's life. His punishment for perceived disobedience leaves physical and emotional scars: “Once, Kevin told Papa I took a few minutes longer, and Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on my face and ringing in my ears for days”.

Kambili is always unsettled whenever she does anything wrong, knowing that Papa is likely to unleash his venom on her. She says after realizing she and Jaja did not inform him on phone their grandpa was with them when he last called at Ifeoma’s house: “Papa would be outraged that neither Jaja nor I had mentioned it when he called. My head was filling up quickly with blood or water or sweat. Whatever it was, I knew I would faint when my head got full”. The psychological damage inflicted by oppression is not limited to Kambili. Ade Coker’s daughter, after witnessing her father’s violent death from a letter bomb, loses her voice and ability to talk: “She will never heal,” Jaja said. “She may have started talking now, but she will never heal”. These instances reveal the pervasive and multifaceted nature of psychological oppression in the novel, demonstrating its profound impact on the characters' inner lives and the necessity for systemic change and healing.

### ***Oppression from forces of nature***

Nature emerges as both a literal and symbolic force of oppression for women, reflecting their struggle against societal and environmental challenges. Through vivid imagery and the juxtaposition of Kambili’s internal experiences with the external environment, Adichie portrays how natural forces exacerbate the hardships women face, often aligning with their emotional and physical states. One of the striking representations of nature’s oppression is its invasive and unsettling presence in Kambili’s life. The scene where she observes earthworms in the bathtub exemplifies how nature intrudes into her already fragile world. “There were more earthworms in the bathtub, and I left them alone, watching the water carry them and send them down the drain”. The earthworms symbolize decay and disorder, unsettling Kambili in an environment where she often seeks solace. This intrusion parallels the instability and oppression Kambili experiences in her father’s home, where even her moments of

respite are invaded by discomfort and unease. Similarly, the oppressive heat at Nsukka mirrors Kambili's emotional burden and the challenges faced by women in navigating their complex realities. When Kambili describes the weather as the "searing sun I have long imagined can suck the moisture from bone marrow", the sun becomes an antagonist, draining and overwhelming her. This unrelenting heat not only makes her journey uncomfortable but also damages the fruits she buys for Ifeoma's former neighbors, highlighting how nature thwarts her attempts to connect and nurture. The blackened bananas symbolize the obstacles women encounter when trying to preserve and extend care in a world that seems set against them.

Moreover, Adichie uses the degradation of Nsukka's environment to reflect the decline of spaces that once offered hope and respite. Kambili observes how "most of the lawns on the university grounds are overgrown now; the long grasses stick up like green arrows". The overgrown grasses and the tarnished statue of the lion signify neglect and hostility, transforming what was once a nurturing space into one that is foreboding. For Kambili, this deterioration mirrors the broader societal challenges women face as they attempt to navigate systems that were once promising but are now rife with obstacles. Rain, another powerful element of nature, also becomes an oppressive force, overwhelming and relentless in its manifestation. When Kambili notes that "the rains came then, pouring down in strong sheets that made it impossible to see the garages across the yard", the torrential rain symbolizes the barriers to clarity and progress. Women, represented by Kambili and others like Ifeoma, must contend with these obscured paths, fighting against natural forces that obscure their vision and complicate their journeys. The rain's power to disrupt and inundate parallels the societal pressures that weigh heavily on women, making their paths toward independence and self-realization fraught with difficulty. Additionally, the aftermath of the rain amplifies the oppressive nature of the environment. As Kambili notes, "the rain came down in slants, hitting the closed windows with a furious rhythm. It would hurl down cashews and mangoes from the trees, and they would start to rot in the humid earth, giving out that sweet-and-sour scent". The image of fallen fruits rotting in the humid earth symbolizes potential thwarted by external forces. For women like Kambili and her aunt Ifeoma, the sweet-and-sour scent of rotting fruits reflects the duality of their experiences-moments of potential and growth undermined by external challenges, whether societal, familial, or environmental.

### ***Intersectionality of the oppressions***

The intersection of various forms of oppression-domestic violence, religious oppression, socioeconomic marginalization, the silencing of young women, among others-forms a complex web that defines the female characters' lives. The novel illuminates how these oppressions are not isolated from one another but instead are interwoven, influencing and reinforcing each other, particularly in the lives of its female characters. The most prominent intersection lies in the toxic relationship between Kambili, her father Eugene, and the religious institution that serves as both a shield and a sword in the family dynamic. Eugene's brutal authoritarianism, rooted in a strict Catholic ideology, intertwines religious oppression with domestic violence. His interpretation of faith is rigid and severe, and this religious orthodoxy becomes a tool to justify and perpetuate his tyrannical control over his wife, children, and even the household staff. Kambili's mother, Beatrice, is emblematic of the woman silenced by both the religious dogma and the physical violence that Eugene imposes. This

intersection of domestic violence with religious oppression not only limits the personal freedom of the women but also deepens their vulnerability, leaving them trapped in a cycle of spiritual and physical subjugation. Eugene's belief that suffering is noble and that his children must endure pain in order to be spiritually elevated mirrors the broader societal tendency to tolerate or ignore violence when cloaked in religious righteousness. This silencing of women, both young and old, is another central theme in the novel, and it intersects with the other forms of oppression to create an environment where women are expected to remain passive, obedient, and invisible. Kambili, as a young woman coming of age in an oppressive home, is the embodiment of this silencing. Her voice is literally muted by her father's violence and emotional manipulation, and her thoughts, feelings, and desires are constantly repressed. Her journey of self-expression and personal liberation is a slow and painful one, tied to the realization that her silence has kept her complicit in her own oppression. This silencing, however, is not just a feature of the family dynamic but also a reflection of the broader societal expectations of women in Nigeria, where conformity to patriarchal norms is paramount. Kambili's growing awareness of her own voice and her eventual defiance against her father signal a subtle rebellion against not just her father's tyranny but also against a society that dictates women's roles and keeps them in subordinate positions. This internal struggle against her silencing mirrors the external struggle for gender equality in Nigerian society, where women are often relegated to passive roles and discouraged from taking active control over their lives.

At the same time, the intersection of these oppressions is also informed by the socioeconomic dynamics of the characters' lives. Eugene, as a wealthy industrialist and media mogul, is able to maintain his oppressive regime not only because of his religious and patriarchal authority but also because of his financial power. His wealth allows him to exert control over others, from his children and wife to the staff in the house and the community members who revere him. The economic disparity between Eugene's privileged status and the poverty of the wider society underscores the socio-economic aspect of oppression, which is deeply entwined with gendered subjugation. Beatrice's suffering, for example, is compounded by her dependence on Eugene's wealth, which makes it difficult for her to challenge or leave him. She is trapped in an oppressive system where her economic survival is tied to a man who uses his financial power to dominate her. This intersection of gendered oppression with economic dependence highlights the vulnerability of women in patriarchal societies, where financial autonomy is often a prerequisite for freedom. Furthermore, the way in which Eugene's wealth is linked to his moral and religious authority speaks to a broader social structure that equates material success with religious spiritual righteousness, further entrenching the oppression of women and reinforcing the hierarchy that keeps them in subjugation. Kambili's growth and eventual empowerment also bring into focus the role of education in the intersectional oppression of women. The limited educational opportunities for women in the novel reflect broader societal trends that restrict their intellectual and social development. Kambili's experiences at school, where she is exposed to new ideas and broader perspectives, stand in stark contrast to her home life, where education is secondary to obedience and religious piety. Her interactions with Auntie Ifeoma, who is an intellectual and independent woman, serve as a turning point in her understanding of her own potential and the possibilities that exist beyond the constraints of her home. Auntie Ifeoma's progressive ideas about gender and independence, as well as her support for Kambili's growth, serve as an antidote to the toxic environment fostered by

Eugene. However, the contrast between Aunty Ifeoma's more liberated outlook and Kambili's experience of religious and familial oppression highlights the systemic barriers that women face in accessing education and personal development. The intersection of education with gendered oppression in the novel suggests that the patriarchal control over women's lives is not only physical but intellectual, depriving women of the tools they need to challenge their subjugation.

The political context of Nigeria, which serves as the backdrop of the novel, is also critical in understanding how these forms of oppression intersect. The country is depicted as a place of political unrest, where authoritarian figures like Eugene wield control not just in their homes but in the broader society. The political corruption and instability in Nigeria, reflected in the military dictatorship of Abacha's regime and societal inequalities, shape the characters' lives in ways that extend beyond the domestic sphere. For Kambili's family, the political climate is both a literal and metaphorical battleground where religious, economic, and gendered oppressions are magnified. Eugene's political activities-his occasional support for the government which bribes him with heavy cash and his moralizing stance on societal issues-are part of the same oppressive system that he enforces in his own home. The novel suggests that the violence, silencing, and economic dependence that women experience are also a product of the larger political and social structures that prioritize power and control over justice and equality. In this way, the novel critiques the intersection of political oppression with gendered and socioeconomic injustices, drawing attention to the ways in which power structures perpetuate the suffering of marginalized groups, particularly women. In addition, the oppression of women by natural forces is inextricably linked to their oppression by societal, religious, and familial systems. Nature becomes both a reflection of and a contributor to the challenges women face, amplifying their struggles and symbolizing the pervasive forces that constrain their lives. Adichie's portrayal of these intersections underscores the resilience of her female characters, who endure and, in some cases, resist the overlapping oppressions that seek to subjugate them. Through these connections, Adichie paints a powerful picture of the multifaceted nature of women's oppression and their unyielding strength in the face of it.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the intersectional oppressions in Purple Hibiscus of 2003 highlight the complexity of the female characters' experiences and the multifaceted nature of their struggles. The novel portrays women as both victims and agents of change, caught in the web of violence, silencing, and systemic oppression, yet capable of resistance and transformation. Through Kambili's journey from silence to self-expression, Adichie illustrates the possibility of breaking free from the chains of oppressive structures. However, the novel also suggests that true liberation requires more than just individual resistance; it demands a collective confrontation of the social, economic, and political forces that sustain gendered violence and inequality. Kambili's eventual empowerment is a testament to the resilience of women who, despite being trapped in a complex system of intersecting oppressions, find ways to reclaim their voices and their agency, challenging the structures that seek to silence and subjugate them. Through this nuanced portrayal, Purple Hibiscus offers a powerful commentary on the intersectionality of female oppression and the urgent need for societal change to address these overlapping forms of injustice.

## Acknowledgement

This research is self-funded.

## Conflict of interest

The author confirms that there is no conflict of interest involved with any party in the publication of this research study.

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