

Narratives of Pain and Power : Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Feminist Reckoning with Gender-Based Violence and Patriarchal Oppression

Ms. Ishita Bhatt

*Research Scholar (Department of English)
Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be University), Haridwar*

KEYWORDS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Gendered Violence, Feminist Epistemology, Patriarchal Hegemony, Postcolonial Feminism, Women's Emancipation

ABSTRACT

This study undertakes a critical examination of gender-based violence and patriarchal hegemony as incisively depicted in the literary corpus of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Through a feminist epistemological framework, it interrogates the thematic undercurrents of *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and *We Should All Be Feminists*, elucidating their profound engagement with the systemic subjugation of women. Adichie's oeuvre unflinchingly exposes the manifold manifestations of gendered violence—ranging from domestic brutality and psychological subordination to sexual predation and the harrowing practice of female genital mutilation—while simultaneously dismantling the sociocultural paradigms that engender female erasure. This discourse aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques, particularly those of Gayatri Spivak and Nawal El Saadawi, situating Adichie's narratives within a broader dialectic of intersectional oppression, wherein colonial legacies, patriarchal dominance, and entrenched socio-political inequities coalesce. By reclaiming silenced narratives and transmuting them into potent articulations of resistance, Adichie not only amplifies the lived experiences of women relegated to the periphery but also catalyzes a radical reimagining of gender paradigms. This paper posits that her literary interventions transcend mere fictional representation, constituting an urgent imperative for deconstructing androcentric structures and fostering an emancipatory discourse on female agency. Ultimately, Adichie's work emerges as an indispensable testament to feminist thought, compelling a global reckoning with the exigencies of gender justice and equitable representation.

Introduction

The concept of gender equality within society manifests in diverse and complex dimensions, shaped by the inherent differences and challenges between the sexes. This article adopts a nuanced approach to examining the perception of domestic violence and abuse endured by women, thereby providing a lens through which to explore the literary contributions of the renowned Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Analysing Adichie's works not only deepens our understanding of the profound impact of violence on women but also illuminates critical issues such as physical abuse, social disparities, sexual violence, female genital mutilation, gender inequality, and psychological trauma.

This study seeks to underscore Adichie's significance in articulating the social realities faced by women, examining the multitude of factors that shape their lived experiences, and assessing the profound implications on their physical and mental well-being. As Adichie asserts

in *We Should All Be Feminists*, “We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: ‘You can have ambition, but not too much.’” This deeply ingrained societal conditioning perpetuates inequality and reinforces structures that normalize the subjugation and abuse of women. Notably, this paper extends beyond an analysis of the author and her literary oeuvre; it serves as a crucial academic endeavour in comprehending the broader global repercussions of violence and abuse against women. By delving into these deeply entrenched societal issues, the article also highlights the intersections of racism, emotional distress, and the multifaceted struggles that define women’s realities in an increasingly complex world.

Literature as a Mirror of Violence and a Path to Empowerment

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has consistently emphasized the profound power of storytelling and its ability to illuminate real-life experiences. Her literary works serve as a compelling testament to the struggles faced by women, offering a critical exploration of the systemic violence and oppression they have endured throughout history. As a distinguished Nigerian writer, Adichie has been an unwavering voice in addressing social injustices, shedding light on the pervasive issues of gender-based violence, societal inequalities, and the enduring forms of abuse that women continue to confront in the contemporary world.

This paper underscores the multifaceted nature of violence against women, analysing its various dimensions and the deeply entrenched societal factors that perpetuate it (Nutsukpo 124). Through her literary lens, Adichie examines the harrowing realities of abusive relationships and domestic violence, offering a nuanced perspective on the experiences of women subjected to oppression. Furthermore, this article delves into critical themes such as physical abuse, the imperative of gender equality, and the horrors of female genital mutilation, among other pressing issues.

Adichie’s work resonates with Gayatri Spivak’s critique in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, where she argues that “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of sexual difference and the colonial subject. It is, rather, that both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the female subaltern in a space where she cannot speak.” (*Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 291). This assertion highlights how marginalized women are doubly silenced—both by patriarchal structures and by the broader mechanisms of colonialist discourse.

Adichie actively challenges this erasure by giving voice to the lived experiences of women who have long been oppressed by patriarchal and colonial structures. Through her storytelling, she reclaims narratives that would otherwise remain unheard, providing a platform for women who have been historically denied agency. By engaging with Adichie’s works, this study aims to illuminate the far-reaching consequences of violence on women’s physical and psychological well-being, reinforcing the urgency of addressing these deeply rooted injustices.

In both contemporary and historical contexts, numerous instances have emerged that invite deep reflection on the pervasive issue of domestic violence and physical abuse endured by women. Through her literary works, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie poignantly underscores how entrenched patriarchal values manipulate and exploit traditional norms, ultimately hindering the progress and autonomy of women. Her novel *Purple Hibiscus* holds profound significance, shedding light on the harrowing experiences of domestic violence that women have faced across generations. The novel not only exposes the brutal realities of such abuse but also underscores its far-reaching implications on women’s mental and physical well-being, shaped by both external societal pressures and internal familial dynamics (Abolfathi et al. 15).

Notably, *Purple Hibiscus* presents the harrowing journey of its protagonist, Kambili, who endures relentless torment and trauma inflicted by her own father. Moreover, she becomes a silent witness to the violence perpetrated against her mother, further emphasizing the grim

reality that women often face severe abuse within the very spaces meant to offer them safety and protection. Adichie extends this discourse beyond the confines of the household, highlighting that physical abuse is not limited to homemakers but extends to working women as well. The novel also underscores that such violence is not exclusively suffered by adult women but is inflicted upon young girls and adolescent females, who, from a tender age, are subjected to brutal mistreatment—often at the hands of their own family members. These unsettling realities demand urgent attention, challenging societal norms that perpetuate cycles of violence against women across generations.

The Unseen Wounds of Sexual Violence Against Women

Sexual violence, on a global scale, represents one of the most intricate and pervasive challenges confronting women today. As a staunch advocate for feminist ideals, Adichie emphasizes the crucial need for women to assert their voices in the face of sexual harassment and abuse—whether inflicted by family members, colleagues, or other individuals. She underscores the imperative of education, not only for women but also for men, to dismantle the societal stigma surrounding sexuality and to foster a deeper understanding of the root causes of sexual violence. Adichie is profoundly critical of the contemporary misinterpretation of feminism as a primarily "feminine" concern, a skewed perception that inadvertently upholds societal structures that restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of women (Caroline 105). In *We Should All Be Feminists*, she argues, "We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about their girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid" (Adichie 33). This deeply ingrained cultural double standard not only reinforces restrictive gender norms but also fosters an environment in which women's autonomy over their own bodies is curtailed, contributing to the perpetuation of sexual violence. By discouraging women from embracing their own agency, society constructs a landscape where female sexuality is policed, while male privilege remains largely unchallenged. As a result, victims of sexual violence often find themselves trapped within a paradox—expected to remain silent to preserve their dignity while being denied justice when they do speak out. In her examination of this issue, Adichie also draws attention to the particularly damaging impact of violations perpetrated by those familiar to the victim—highlighting the intimate betrayal that often accompanies such abuse.

Furthermore, Adichie poignantly reflects on the cultural conditioning that compels women to remain silent in the face of sexual assault, fearing not only the social stigma that may befall them but also the potential ruin of their reputations and that of their families. This societal imposition, she argues, complicates the path toward justice for women subjected to sexual violence. This notion resonates with Gayatri Spivak's assertion in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, where she observes, "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in the silence of women. But the silence that is imposed on them is part of their oppression" (Spivak 308). Spivak's words illuminate the broader systemic forces that not only silence marginalized women but actively construct their invisibility, mirroring Adichie's exploration of how patriarchal structures suppress the voices of those who have suffered violence, rendering them powerless in both public and private spheres. The imposed silence is not merely an absence of speech but a deliberate erasure, ensuring that women's suffering remains unacknowledged, and their resistance is perceived as futile. In this way, both Adichie and Spivak expose the dangerous mechanisms through which oppression is perpetuated—not only through direct violence but also through the denial of voice, agency, and justice.

The Enduring Horror of Female Genital Mutilation(FGM) on Women

As a Nigerian woman herself, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has personally encountered numerous societal constraints and systemic challenges within the social framework. In her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she critically examines the deeply entrenched and harrowing practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), a tradition that has been inflicted upon women

for centuries. Recognized as one of the most grievous violations of women's rights, FGM persists in various regions across the globe, reinforcing gender inequality and impeding the progress and autonomy of women—an issue that Adichie vehemently opposes.

Within *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the character Kinene experiences the brutal reality of FGM while working in Nigeria during the Biafran War, illustrating the inescapable presence of gender-based violence even in times of political and social upheaval. Through her literary works, Adichie underscores the persistent discrimination faced by women both in Nigeria and globally, emphasizing how systemic gender disparities are not only rooted in biological distinctions but are further exacerbated by rigid cultural and societal constructs (Uche et al. 88).

Adichie specifically argues that while biological differences between genders have historically been used to justify discrimination, cultural traditions often intensify these inequalities, creating an oppressive environment that severely hinders women's ability to live with dignity and autonomy. Among these harmful traditions, FGM stands as one of the most egregious, and Adichie's exploration of this issue serves as a powerful tool for shedding light on its devastating consequences. Her stance aligns with that of renowned activist and writer Nawal El Saadawi, who, reflecting on her own traumatic experience with FGM, once wrote: "The woman was left as a body without a soul, a creature reduced to a mere physical object, stripped of her desires, and robbed of her ability to feel." (El Saadawi 33). This poignant assertion underscores the profound psychological and physical toll of FGM, reinforcing Adichie's call for urgent social and legislative action. By addressing this controversial practice, Adichie not only raises awareness but also advocates for its complete abolition, envisioning a world where women are no longer subjected to such inhumane violations.

Adichie's Feminist Awakening

A nuanced understanding of human rights must extend beyond mere legal recognition to encompass the principles of gender equality and empowerment as fundamental pillars of a just society. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a distinguished feminist writer, underscores that feminism is not an ideology confined solely to women but a movement advocating for the equitable treatment of all individuals, ultimately fostering broader social progress. She critically examines the misconception that feminism is exclusionary, emphasizing instead its intrinsic role in dismantling systemic inequalities that disadvantage both men and women. Furthermore, Adichie draws from her own childhood experiences in Nigeria to illustrate how societal perceptions of gender shape opportunities and impose constraints on women, reinforcing the urgent need for an egalitarian framework that mitigates competition, discrimination, and gender-based violence (Rahaman et al. 4446).

Cultural norms across different societies are inextricably linked to socioeconomic structures, financial power, and inherited traditions, all of which play a decisive role in either fostering or restricting women's empowerment. Adichie articulates how these factors collectively obstruct women's access to opportunities and perpetuate their marginalization. This perspective aligns with the insights of renowned Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo, who asserts, "The society that separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools" (Aidoo 87). Aidoo's critique of societal division reflects the broader issue of gender disparity—where the exclusion of women from key spheres of influence results in an imbalanced and unsustainable social order. Adichie's exploration of gender equality in contemporary discourse thus serves as a compelling call to reconfigure societal structures, ensuring that empowerment is not a privilege but an inherent right integrated into the fabric of social development.

The complexities of psychological abuse are crucial to comprehend, as they often serve as a gateway to the emotional mistreatment of women within the unique confines of their familial and social environments. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has illuminated the insidious

nature of psychological harassment, particularly when inflicted by a woman's own family members—those who should be her sanctuary but instead become a source of profound distress. Such abuse is not an isolated event but a cumulative experience, deeply ingrained over time, perpetuated by those closest to the victim (Nur 30).

Adichie astutely recognizes that the root of emotional and psychological abuse against women lies in entrenched social restrictions and patriarchal norms, which continue to sustain these injustices even in contemporary society. As she asserts, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: 'You can have ambition, but not too much'" (Adichie 27). This systemic conditioning fosters an environment where women are expected to endure psychological harm in silence, their suffering dismissed as an unfortunate inevitability rather than a violation of their dignity.

Furthermore, Adichie's discourse on feminism extends beyond the notion of a women's struggle alone; it is a universal pursuit of equality and empowerment, one that men, too, must actively support. By advocating for gender parity, her work underscores the urgent need to challenge societal attitudes that enable gender-based violence and harassment. Raising awareness of these issues is imperative, not only to protect women but to cultivate a more just and equitable society—one in which men recognize feminism not as an opposing force, but as a necessary foundation for collective progress.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists* eloquently articulates that feminism is not merely a pursuit exclusive to women but a crucial social framework that fosters equality for both men and women in the 21st century. She underscores the necessity of dismantling entrenched societal norms that limit women's empowerment, advocating instead for a world where equality is not a privilege but a fundamental right (Kristina 19). Adichie's perspective on feminism is both revolutionary and inclusive, emphasizing that it is not solely a women's cause but a movement that demands the participation of all individuals, regardless of gender. As she poignantly asserts, "Gender matters everywhere in the world. And I would like today to ask that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world. A fairer world. A world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves" (Adichie). Through this lens, she envisions feminism as a transformative force, one that paves the way for an equitable society where both men and women coexist without the constraints of gender-based discrimination.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie poignantly portrays the harrowing reality of domestic abuse, particularly within the confines of one's own family. Through the eyes of Kambili, the novel's protagonist, Adichie unveils the suffocating grip of patriarchal oppression, as Kambili and her mother, Beatrice Achike, endure relentless physical and emotional torment at the hands of her authoritarian father (Ifrah 109). The novel serves as a powerful commentary on the devastating consequences of domestic violence, urging families to recognize the urgency of fostering a nurturing and respectful environment, where men acknowledge the profound impact of their actions on the women closest to them. Adichie's narrative exposes the silent suffering many women endure, reinforcing the necessity for societal change. As she writes, "There are people, she once said, who think that we cannot rule ourselves because the few times we tried, we failed, as if all the others who rule themselves today got it right the first time" (Adichie 196). This sentiment mirrors the resilience required to challenge deep-seated oppression, reminding us that progress, though fraught with struggle, is both possible and necessary. Through *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie compels readers to confront the brutal realities of domestic abuse and to advocate for a world where love and respect replace fear and subjugation.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie insightfully underscores that one of the most significant factors in understanding the violence inflicted upon women—both physical and psychological—is the influence of their immediate family and the broader social environment

in which they exist. She highlights that entrenched social norms and systemic violence not only shape societal attitudes toward women but also empower family members to enforce oppressive restrictions, often culminating in abuse and long-term suffering (Astrick 14).

Adichie's perspective compels us to recognize the urgent need for families to foster awareness about the constraints placed upon women and to critically evaluate the deep-seated prejudices that curtail their autonomy and personhood. As she poignantly states in *The Danger of a Single Story*, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story" (Adichie). This sentiment echoes the reality that rigid societal expectations often reduce women to a single narrative—one of subservience and limitation—thereby justifying the very discrimination that leads to their marginalization.

To counteract this, society must embrace a more dynamic and inclusive approach, one that extends equity and empowerment to both women and men. By dismantling restrictive social frameworks and fostering an environment of acceptance and opportunity, we can pave the way for women's growth and development, ultimately reducing the prevalence of violence and ensuring a future where equality is not merely an ideal but a lived reality.

Conclusion

The overarching essence of this article lies in its profound exploration of the various dimensions articulated by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie regarding violence against women. Beyond merely dissecting the social complexities that perpetuate such injustices, the article delves into Adichie's critical perspective on the root causes of gender-based violence. It brings to light the entrenched structures that foster domestic abuse and physical oppression, questioning why women disproportionately bear the brunt of such atrocities.

Furthermore, the research underscores the grave reality that sexual harassment, as a form of violence, is not merely an individual affliction but a systemic transgression—one that subjects countless women to both physical and psychological torment. Adichie's works serve as a clarion call for society to re-evaluate its stance on gender equity, urging a paradigm shift toward recognizing women's empowerment and equality as fundamental human rights rather than negotiable privileges.

Change, as Adichie suggests, is imperative. It is not merely an abstract ideal but a necessary reformation that demands an unwavering commitment to dismantling the barriers of discrimination and racialized misogyny that continue to subjugate women. Echoing this sentiment, Gayatri Spivak incisively asserts, "When we say 'we,' what do we mean? Which is the inclusive structure that we believe is valid for 'we'?" (Spivak 275). This question compels us to interrogate the exclusionary frameworks within our societies—those that relegate women to the margins while upholding patriarchal dominance as an unquestioned norm.

Thus, as Adichie contends, a multifaceted transformation within social structures is essential. Only through the intentional deconstruction of these oppressive systems can we pave the way for sustainable progress, ensuring that women are no longer confined by the limitations imposed upon them but are instead empowered to claim their rightful space in society, free from violence and subjugation.

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