

Feb 8th, 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM

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Michael Eniola Oshindoro
Bowling Green State University

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Solidarity Between Women in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Michael Oshindoro

Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green Ohio

oshinme@bgsu.edu

Introduction

This article explores the power dynamics of the African woman to explain solidarity between women in the face of male domination and oppression in Chimamanda Adichie's first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. There, Adichie presents a complex reality of the Nigerian society, with particular focus on the Igbo, a tribal majority in the country. The novel details a woman's ordeal and how she breaks free from her husband's abusive grip, which does not spare their two children either. Mr. Eugene Achike, mostly referred to as Papa in the novel, sets the rules in the house and makes Beatrice Achike, also known as Mama, and their teenage children, Kambili and Jaja, follow them; regularly he uses physical torture to enforce the rules. While in public he fights for human rights and freedom of speech through his newspaper outfit, at home, he oppresses and bullies. This regime of abuse continues unchallenged until much later in the novel when Mama takes agency of her destiny and that of her children, a turning point that must be situated within traditional conception of womanhood and the multiplicity of identities that she embodies.

Adichie carefully constructs her female characters to reflect the variegated personalities—forced or self-willed—that define an Igbo woman in post-colonial Nigeria. My primary focus is on Beatrice, a dependent stay-at-home mother of two, and her widowed sister-in-law, Aunty Ifeoma, a university lecturer. Because of the novel's portrayal of both women, and the reading of scholars like Ndula (2017) and Duran (2017), the character of Aunty

Ifeoma may become ideal the African woman of the 21st century while Beatrice may be understood as the African woman of the past. Describing both women, Ndula and Duran refer to Aunty Ifeoma as ‘unconventional’ and ‘free-spirited’ and read Beatrice as a ‘typical’ African woman.

While there is some merit to these representations, what needs to be reviewed is the implication of those qualifiers: for example, that it is Aunty Ifeoma’s education that makes her unconstrained by convention, making her an enlightened, bold, and a strong woman other women should aspire to become. Juxtaposing Beatrice’s depiction as weak, indecisive, and taciturn with Ifeoma’s strong, assertive, and outspoken persona, Ndula concludes that “all these qualities speak to the way [Ifeoma] parts with the social constructs of her society for her gender” (38). This interpretation makes it imperative to point out that while traditional and Western ideologies coexist in Igboland, to the extent that the latter has considerable influence over the former, the features displayed by character of Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* derive primarily from her tradition.

I argue on the contrary that the personality traits of Aunty Ifeoma’s character, are indeed representative of an Igbo woman and her Western education is merely complementary to her Igbo values: assertiveness (she is daring, questions Papa’s condescension and Papa Nnukwu’s patriarchal mindset), aggressiveness (when she says she considered stuffing sand into the mouth of an invisible female character), and her ‘unconventional’ stance on marriage (she does not believe a woman should endure an abusive marriage). I argue further that the consequences of taking her education as the liberating force is that it robs the Igbo cultural canon of entitlement to its own rights as a sanctioned system of beliefs with its own beauty, truth, and

flaws, just as it promotes the colonialist myth that Western values are needed to ‘save’ the Igbo culture from itself.

My hope for this paper is to draw attention to the power dynamics of Igbo—and Nigerian—women and how this strength, with all its complexities, reveals a connection to their forebears; an understanding I strongly believe is imperative for the wider audience, especially those who may be unfamiliar with the Nigerian society, in order to counter the risk of accepting the nuances of the binary opposites—educated vs. uneducated, indecisive vs. assertive—as the full and ideal story of the Nigerian or African woman in general; an interpretation which is an outright oversimplification. Indeed, beyond her education and modernism, Ifeoma breathes the Igbo culture and ideology, and the liberating role she assumes derives from her Igbo roots, making her *not* unconventional. Beatrice is much more complex: her weaknesses are indeed her strength; the same reason she endures suffering is the very basis for her disruption of the institution—in this case, of marriage—for which she sacrifices and long treasures.

Conceptualizing African Feminism

With regards to her transformative role as ‘an entertainer, teacher, social critic, ideologue,’ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie belongs to the ilk Ogunyemi (1996) refers to as “Griottes.” By Ogunyemi’s definition, one fundamental feature Adichie shares with other griottes—women writers as transformation agents—is that she “cause[s] imperceptible shifts in established discourses” (3). Adichie has added her authorial voice, replete with authority, to the liberation of women from generational and institutionalized subordination. Her literary canon addresses the trope of women victimization, women in diaspora, and women and girl child

education, but it also deals with the effect of postcolonial administration on Nigeria and Nigerians, the Nigerian Civil War and military dictatorship. All these mark her induction into the ranks of Nigerian women-writers league, building on the discourses already established by eminent pathfinders like Flora Nwapa, whose *Efuru* Ogunyemi describes as “a matrix... the original on which other Nigerian women’s works keep signifying” (132). Yet, as Ogunyemi argues: in spite of the *aşo ebi*—a clothing metaphor for the ‘uniform’ genre to which Nigerian women writers subscribe—“there are always distinctions in the total effect of each person’s outfit, creating individuality in uniformity through choice accessories and poise of carriage” (10). To some within the ilk, Adichie expresses her own individuality within the uniformity in a rather upsetting way: with regards to the actualization of gender equality, her brand of feminism deviates very aggressively from the conception of other Nigerian, especially Igbo, female writers. This ideological difference has cast a barrier between the griottes: modern feminist writers like Adichie on one side, and some Nigerian scholars/philosophers on the other. While the latter camp also push for gender equality, they are cautious to identify as feminists. Nkiru Nzegwu (2006) admits—or rather questions—on the one hand that Western Feminism has “worked to spread the ‘fact’ of women’s subjugation around the world,” she contends, on the other hand, that “in its evangelical mission, feminism had become a colonizing system of beliefs that sought to remake every family and every society in the image of its own” (14). Feminism as an emancipatory movement within the African context has been equated with another Eurocentric ruse, an attempt by the Western elements to cast African writers in its own mould. Many think that by aligning with Western feminism, Adichie may be misrepresenting the Igbo culture and history. In a pointed critic of Adichie’s TED Talk, “We should all be feminist,”

Maureen Ikeotuonye (2015) decries what she calls ‘Mary-Amaka Feminism,’ a term she coins “to encapsulate the underlying serial layers of Eurocentric interventions masquerading as African personhood” (295). She contends that Nigeria has suffered from an effect of “different layering of colonialisms that intersect to normalize the version of events that aligns with the dominant axis” (299). For her, Western Feminism is a topping on that layering of colonialisms, a sentiment that some non-Igbo scholars share.

Maintaining that prior to colonialism, the African society was gender neutral, Oyeyemi (1997) argues against what she considers to be an “epistemological shift occasioned by the imposition of Western gender categories on Yoruba discourse,” positing that the fundamental category ‘woman’ was non-existent in Yorubaland before its prolonged contact with the West, and as a result the ‘woman question’ remains “an imported problem” (ix)—what Oyeyemi calls an epistemological shift may be what Gayatri Spivak calls ‘epistemic violence’ in her famous writing “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

While these female scholars do not question the basic argument of feminism and what it stands for, they claim that the idea of male domination vs. female subordination is only a result of colonial manipulations, and that prior to then, African, particularly Igbo women—living in complementarity with men—had enormous degree of latitude to define their own lives without recourse to patriarchy. Nzegwu maintains that the historical and cultural evidence for gender oppressiveness within African tradition has roots in European imperialism and “in a corpus of ethnographic materials that were used to justify colonial administration” (14).

Both Nzegwu and Adichie, although representing different camps on the Feminist spectrum, agree on the devastating effect of colonialism and its erosion of African values,

customs, and traditions. For Nzegwu, one social institution that has taken direct hit is the family. Surveying pre-colonial Igboland vis-a-viz the place of women within it, her book *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture*, paints a picture of the traditional Igbo family where women had much the same rights and privileges as men, functioned in complementary capacities, and embodied shifting social roles: women as wives, mothers, daughters and even husbands to lineage wives. Adichie, in *Purple Hibiscus*, takes Nzegwu's concerns a step further by magnifying the effect of Western religion on the African family. She is invested in exposing the utterly despicable indulgence of the male as he wields his power and influence to terrorize and subjugate the female. Although the events described in Adichie's novel and Nzegwu's book may have been set in two separate cultural spaces—the former's are set in contemporary Igbo land while the latter's mostly refer to pre-colonial Igbo society—I believe that Nzegwu's position is instructive and holds epistemological importance for the understanding of the power dynamics that take place in *Purple Hibiscus*, especially if we consider the character of Ifeoma who bears strong personality resemblance to the Igbo women Nzegwu references.

Patriarchy, Tradition, and Religion and Colonial Influence

Steeped in the Igbo culture, set in post-colonial Nigeria, the story presents a mix of traditional and contemporary Igbo values especially as it relates to family life and religion. This mix reflects current realities in contemporary Nigeria, no less the conflicts inherent in the ominous coexistence of African and colonial institutions, which have now meshed into sets of complicated identities and allegiances. As a result, the sense of Africanness effaces given the institutionalized colonial ideologies.

There is an interplay of culture, tradition, and religion as mechanisms of gender oppression in *Purple Hibiscus*. Eugene's power and affluence privilege his personality and make him impervious to correction. More than the effect of Igbo tradition and culture, religion is the center from which patriarchy and other forms of oppression and abuse takes its root in the novel. Through the character of Eugene Achike, suppression is not only articulated relative to the female gender as a social category, tradition also comes under attack. The novel highlights Eugene's demonization of and deviation from Igbo traditional religion as he idealizes Christianity to the extent of drawing the moral line between himself and 'heathens.' One of his failings comes from a very traditional, patriarchal version of Catholicism. His character embodies the complex shades of both religion and the force of institutionalized patriarchy. Such embodiment manifests in various instances in the novel. Because Mama initially declines to observe the family's Sunday ritual of visiting the Reverend Father of St Agnes Catholic church, Father Benedict, after Mass, it counts as sin with Eugene. Her excuse of nausea does not save her from being punished; a routine exercise. His violence lead to the termination of her pregnancy. Papa's conception of religion is such that confession of sin and supplication alone do not suffice to receive forgiveness. Beyond penance, there must be restitution; he makes his household pay for their transgressions.

It is important to note at this juncture that a major factor in the enduring regime of abuse in the Achike family is that Papa, Mama and their children are distant from their extended families. Representing Eugene as a pariah, with his isolationist style of parenting, Adichie presents the result of a distorted conception of family based on colonial influence as manifested through religion. By detailing Eugene's excommunication of his own father on the grounds that

the older Achike chooses to worship his *chi* or gods, an interest power dynamic given the social structure that ranks a parent as a superordinate, *Purple Hibiscus* identifies the shift from a conceptually communal view of family to a self-defined, individualistic one; he insists on a nuclear family structure. Victor Chikezie Uchendu (2007) notes that within the African situation, the extended family counts as the ideal, and “in the traditional prestige system, it is the ideal that motivated the aspiring individual to accumulate wealth and use it to build up “social power”” (184). Despite his popularity among his village people, Eugene's fanaticism reduces his social power; he is infamous for his hostility against Anikwenwa, a village elder,¹ who compares him to ‘a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave!’ His unpopular Catholic belief blinds him to the Igbo spirit of community. Yet, communal living and traditional institutions like religion are interconnected; animosity for traditional religion, in the case of Eugene, affects communal membership. Inability to negotiate the intricate link between tradition and religion leads to self or externally enforced dissociation. Such seclusion, as with the Achike family—where children may not visit their grandfather because he is seen as a pagan, may not socialize with townspeople because they need to appear civilized—creates a world of their own, an atmosphere that encourages the abusive streak to continue unabated, since no one gets to see what happens behind the erected walls that separate the Achike family from the rest of its society. For most of the novel, the Achike family is defined first in terms of Papa, as the central focus, then with his dependents (Beatrice, Kambili, and Jaja), rather than in terms of the more culturally correct “extended” family (152). Adichie helps us understand the importance of an extended family in

¹ While the Igbo tradition is egalitarian in its outlook, the place of ‘elders of the land’ is sacrosanct. Adichie draws attention to how Eugene’s social status; his education and affluence, inflated by his questionable politics on religion, gets in his way of respecting the traditional values of the Igbo people. Considering the potency of the words of elders, Anikwenwa’s statement here is symbolic for the eventual fate of Eugene later in the novel.

the African context by constructing the character of Ifeoma, especially as we see that Eugene has broken ties with the very institution that could put him in check, with his father, Papa Nnukwu, at the top of the list.²

By introducing Ifeoma, the novel confirms Uchendu's assertion that "in the African situation, while the husband/wife relation is gaining in importance, it is seldom the hub of the system" (185). The Achike dyad of father-mother, parents-children makes it an 'isolated' family in the novel: Kambili's classmates consider her a snob; Kambili and Jaja do not mix well with Ifeoma's children because of the different family ideals. The sense of camaraderie that characterizes teenagerhood is missing in the daily lives of the Achike children. This lack of social skills reveals the disconnect between the Achike family's nuclear setup and the ideal kin-oriented family structure; it also blocks any links with outside influence until Ifeoma interposes to resolve the disconnection. Ifeoma's efforts have, however, been attributed to her formal education and modernism, a stance I would like to contend.

Ifeoma as a Forbear

Denkyi-Manieson (2017) highlights female education, marginalization, marriage, childbirth, and fertility as some of the overarching themes found in Adichie's novels. On education, she posits that Adichie juxtaposes Beatrice and Ifeoma as two different women, one

² While the general reading is that Eugene is fierce, powerful, and domineering, he is still a subject of the colonialist. He dictates and rules in his own home and within his family. Among the villagers, he still commands a lot of respect. However, whenever he steps out of the traditional Igbo cultural space, he is subjected to a greater power: he has to consult with and ask for approval of Reverend Father Benedict before he consents to Kambili and Jaja's trip to Aokpe pilgrimage. Just as Beatrice is vulnerable, helpless, and weak, Eugene embodies the same sense of subservience in his interactions with white people. When he visits Kambili's school to compare her to Chinwe Jideze, the girl who beats Kambili to the first position in the school's previous academic year, Eugene's countenance changes from a fierce Igbo father to a lackey of the Europeans. When he sees Sister Margaret, a white school teacher at Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School, he changes his accent in "an-eager-to-please way" (46), the same way he switching to a British accent whenever he speaks with Father Benedict.

educated, the other not. To Denkyi-Manieson, Beatrice is “symbolic of our womenfolk who have given up under the yoke of gender segregation, resigned to fate and have resolved to live in masochism” while Ifeoma is “well educated, enlightened and a liberated woman” (52). Indeed, education is a powerful tool in the empowerment of women; according to Bungaro (2006) social mobility and choices seem highly unlikely for women with limited access to wealth and education. At the same time, the significance of a good education does not come without an ideological challenge to traditional Igbo institutions like the *umunna* (lineage sons), *umuada* (lineage daughters), and family elders forum which promote egalitarian ideals in handling the affairs of families and communities. Accentuating the efficiency of these cultural institutions within the Igbo society, Nzegwu reports that the Igbo woman leaned on these institutions to activate her voice within the family, and her freedom of choice on marriage, child rearing, and ownership of properties. It would appear that recourse to cultural values remains the center of formation of identity for the woman. For while she may be educated, the force of epistemic violence of male superiority never effaces. Drawing the literacy line between Beatrice and Ifeoma, as Denkyi-Manieson does, suggests an appropriation of Ifeoma’s formal education as the liberating force in the novel: that Ifeoma’s Western education on its own liberates the oppressed, as though it is not the same education with which Ifeoma liberates that Eugene terrorizes.³

Rather than purely a result of formal education, Ifeoma’s wisdom and idiosyncrasies show a mix of both formal and native intelligence, with the latter most highly valued in the novel. We see her demonstrate her native intelligence when she utters the aphoristic “When a

³ Even though their ages are not indicated, Ifeoma shows more maturity to be considered the senior of the two. In the Igbo context, age makes a difference between siblings and this has implications for the exertion of authority. From the tone of her voice in her conversation with Eugene, Ifeoma does not sound appear to plead; her utterances are more performative, almost a command. When in Abba she tells Eugene to allow Kambili and Jaja to go out with her and her children, she does not appeal: “Eugene, let the children come out with us!” (77).

house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head” (213), a powerful statement that nudges Beatrice from her passive womanhood into proactive motherhood. For it is after this statement that Beatrice takes agency of her destiny; an instance that demonstrates the novel’s representation of motherhood as both a mix of self-determination—Beatrice takes action to stop the abusive regime of husband toward her and her children—and a force of oppression—until later in the novel she refuses to act because of her social roles and the constraining cultural expectations of the society from a wife and a mother, who must sustain her home and endure uncomfortable conditions for the sustenance of her marriage and the safety of her children.

The Achike household enclave is antithetical to the historical structure of the Igbo family, which rather than a private space, represents a public place, a melting pot for immediate and distant relatives. Such is the depiction of Ifeoma’s household in Nsukka; alive, bustling, and full of convivial commotion. Whenever Amaka, Ifeoma’s daughter, taunts Kambili in a manner that shows condescension, Ifeoma intervenes by scolding Amaka; and in one instance, exhibiting her trait as a strict African mother, Ifeoma challenges Kambili: “*O ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back at her!” (170). Here, she exhibits the traits of stern mother when she challenges Kambili to talk back at Amaka who criticizes Kambili for not knowing how to make the *orah* soup. Furthermore, her disposition to issues of tradition marks Ifeoma as a person deeply rooted in the Igbo culture: while in one instance she objects to the idea behind Nnukwu’s Papa prayer that Chukwu, the Supreme God, brings a man into her life, Ifeoma, in another instance, defends Papa Nnukwu’s faith in his *Chi*, educating Jaja and Kambili that “Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan ... he is a traditionalist,” helping the children see the parallels of belief in a Higher God, supplication for others, and cleansing that exist between Christianity and

the African Traditional religion (81). Besides issues of ideology, Ifeoma breathes the Igbo culture in her appearance: her dress sense, which is mostly tying wrappers and wearing blouse of matching colors, is typical of the Igbo woman; a marker of her identity. An identity which Kambili confirms when she imagines Ifeoma as ‘a proud ancient forebear’ who fills an entire room, mothering babies from toddlers to adolescents (80). It is difficult to associate these bits of Ifeoma’s persona with her education or modernity and civility. The ‘wide lapels of her blue, A-line dress smelling of lavender’ (71) and her interest in wearing lipsticks only reflect her openness to Western culture, and should not be the basis of measuring her ideological views. Besides, her opinion of the treatment of Nigerians at the US embassy does not suggest a craze for America. Looking at her representation in the novel, Ifeoma mirrors the likes of the historical Omu: from the grace in her physical appearance to the depth of her intellect, and the wisdom with which conducts the affairs of her home, extended family and work. Her personhood is deeply rooted in the Igbo universe, making it difficult to simply read her as ‘unconventional’ because while she questions certain aspects in the fabric of Igbo culture and tradition, her loyalty to them is unparalleled.

Ifeoma’s opposition to female stereotype is not unconventional. Neither is her uncompromising position on abusive marriage or male domination un-African or un-Igbo, so to speak. Nzegwu references the same thought pattern within the historical Igbo society. In Chapter 4 of *Family Matters*, titled “The Conclave”, Nzegwu creates a docudrama in which she sets up a conversation where Omu, an Igbo matriarchal sage, fielding questions from Western feminists on the place of gender hierarchies in Igboland. According to this sage: “we [Igbo women] do not believe that humanity is male, and that man defines women” (162). When in *Purple Hibiscus*

Ifeoma mentions that “sometimes, life begins where marriage ends” (75), she echoes Omu, emphasizing the Igbo woman’s independence over her body and her being; exclusive to her and without apology to a man, and should a husband become tyrant, Omu maintains that there is an army of lineage daughters who will make him realize the power of solidarity between women.

Mama as a Matriarch⁴

If Mama’s reserved personality says anything about her as an African woman, it must be that, for her and other African women like her, power lies in her silence and calm; her main reason for enduring the suffering is the safety of her children, the protection of her ‘joy of motherhood,’ to use the words of Nwapa (23). In a conversation with Kambili, the utterance below reflects Mama’s default position toward marriage:

God is faithful. 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 (20).

The statement suggests an essential part of Mama’s conception of marriage; an institution upheld by the presence of, at least, an offspring: if a woman fails to activate the stereotypical fecundity, she is vulnerable to displacement. It is not that Mama is barren—she had had Kambili at the times of the miscarriages—rather it is the fear of losing her home to another woman that bothers

⁴ I choose to address Beatrice as Mama in this section because I will be discussing her primarily as a mother. Throughout the novel, the narrator, her daughter, calls her Mama, a word that is evocative of motherhood. Also, Papa is Eugene.

her. Also, the utterance above reflects the logic that if men decide not to activate that aspect of their male privileges—the leeway to polygamy—women should show indebtedness, a logic that the novel later dismantles. This duality—apprehension over the security of her marriage, with her children at the heart consideration, and her mental construction of gratitude to Eugene—condemns Mama to a life of endurance and tolerance.

Throughout much of the novel, Mama absolves Eugene of his patriarchal excesses at the expense of her own wellbeing, a disposition Adichie highlights to reveal how Mama, like some other women, has been inculcated into an ideology that harms her. With multiple terminations, and the resultant psychological trauma, Adichie complicates the story with Mama's repeated justification of Eugene's actions. Her statement above expresses the effect of societal conditioning. Adichie constantly directs our attention to the culturally-induced disposition to polygamy, male entitlement and narcissism, and an expected female gratitude. By mentioning other women's readiness to become second wives, Mama shows admiration for Eugene's outward personality traits and social standing, reflecting a mental disposition of indebtedness, submission, and helplessness. Adichie gives us access into her mind: because of the status and security that come with the suffering, the pain is not unbearable. Eugene's factories and the newspaper outfit bring enough money for the family to live on. Mama's children get to ride to school in their private car.

This highlights the importance of economic independence, an area in which the Igbo woman has never lagged behind: according to Nzegwu, Igbo women owned landed properties, traded in goods, and owned numerous servants. Eugene's flawed interpretation of the Christian tenet of submissiveness condemns Mama into a life of total dependence, devoid of economic

emancipation. Ironically, because she is fully dependent, Mama's inner strength could endure the pains as they mount everyday. Conditioned to a life of false consciousness, she submits to a masochistic denial of her own needs. But ritualized abuse is time bound, just as oppression has defined boundaries. With her children gradually being led to the slaughter, Mama reaches her epiphany; a red line an oppressor does not want to cross is the woman's joys of motherhood.

Although Eugene has crossed that line for many years, Mama has always endured his abuses because she is stuck between her love for her children and the culturally-imposed submission to her husband. However, after Eugene beats Kambili into a coma when he finds out she has a painting of Papa-Nnukwu, Ifeoma's charge that Mama must take agency—that if one does not run out of a burning house, it will collapse on one's head—it becomes obvious to her how much danger she risks if she continues to allow herself and her children live under Eugene's tyranny. Ifeoma's charge strikes Mama, causing her to reflect: "It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before" (214). This reflection marks the turning point for Mama in the novel. She repeats the statement in the same conversation; rather than a conversation with Ifeoma, I think it is a conversation with herself. It triggers her resolve to put paid to the regime of abuse and liberate her children. Notably, at this critical moment between realization and resolve, her social conditioning still resurfaces: she tempers Eugene's atrocity when she tells Kambili: "Your father has been by your bedside every night these past three days. He has not slept a wink" (214). Yet, she retreats into her inner self; when Mother Lucy, the Principal at Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School, brings Kambili's report card to her at the hospital, Mama "did not sing her Igbo praise song; she only said, 'Thanks be to God'" (215). Her introspection gives way to her reassessment of her role as a mother.

Here lies the complexity of the power of Mama's type of an African woman: the same reason she endures an uncomfortable situation may be the very basis for her disruption of the institution she sacrifices for and long treasures, in this case marriage. Defining motherhood, Akujobi (2011) explains the concept in relation to a mother's link to her child. She stresses that the state of motherhood utters responsibilities for the woman, that: "Motherhood is [...] a moral transformation" where a mother ceases to be an autonomous individual but now has responsibility for the preservation of the life of her child (Quoted by Uko, 58). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Mama's 'transformation' comes from the epiphany that the lives of her children are endangered by Eugene's constant torture. She comes to realize that she owes a moral and spiritual duty as a mother to safeguard her children's lives; that commitment to marriage is constant and expected, but as soon as the lives of her children are threatened, she must act and attack if she needs to. Quoting Filomina Chioma Steady, Ogunyemi (1996) describes the strong bond between a mother and her children: "The bond between the mother and child surpassed all other human bonds and transcended patrilineal rules of descent" (76). Behind her weakness lies her strength. Her response in one of her exchanges with Ifeoma best describes this apparent paradox:

Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? ... Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying a bride price? (250).

In retrospect, Adichie tasks the reader to identify the undercurrent of Mama's statement which is at odds with her action, the poisoning of her husband and the major event that follows. It is not

unexpected that Mama is making this statement. What is very interesting, however, is that the conversation takes place in Nsukka after she starts to put poison in Eugene's tea. At the demise of Papa, she admits: "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka" (290). In this way, Adichie masterfully constructs her characters to reveal the intricate personalities of an Igbo woman, her embodiment of truth, morals, and responsibility occasioned by exigence.

Conclusion

In the pages above, I complicated the overly dichotomized way of reading Adichie's construct of two major female characters in *Purple Hibiscus* as personality opposites. The novel's representation of Beatrice and her sister-in-law, Ifeoma, forms the basis of some readers' interpretation of Beatrice as a typical African woman because she is quiet, appears weak, and dependent and Ifeoma as 'free-spirited' and 'unconventional' due to her independence and assertiveness. I perceived both women as Igbo women through and through, identifying the complexities that make it difficult to simply describe one as weak and the other, strong. By introducing Ifeoma as the character that supports Beatrice and challenges her to assume agency of her destiny and those of her children, Adichie reads a different meaning to women supporting other women; that solidarity may come from other sources apart from a woman's immediate family, a point Adichie might be making since she leaves out detailed reference to Beatrice's family background.

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