



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 13. Issue 1. 2026 (Jan-March.)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

Faith, Femininity, and Resistance: A Feminist Perspective on *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Dr. Deepak Lathwal

Associate Professor (English), Saheed Rai Singh Government College, Sampla (Rohtak),
Haryana, India
Email: dlathwal78@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.13.1.300](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.13.1.300)



Article information

Article Received:10/03/2026
Article Accepted:26/03/2026
Published online:31/03/2026

Abstract

This paper examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* through the lens of African Feminism, particularly focusing on *Stiwanism* as outlined by Molar Ogundipe. The study explores the intersection of gender, faith, and resistance within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, emphasizing how women navigate and challenge patriarchal structures in a postcolonial society. Central to this analysis is how the novel portrays the roles of women particularly Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma, and Kambili – whose experiences of oppression, resilience, and transformation underscore the dynamics of gender inequality in both familial and societal spheres. By applying *Stiwanism*, this paper will investigate the characters' responses to patriarchal authority, gender expectations, and the influence of religion, particularly Catholicism, on their lives. It will also examine how women in *Purple Hibiscus* embody agency, resistance, and empowerment within the constraints of cultural traditions. The paper will engage with supplementary feminist theories, such as Intersectionality and Postcolonial Feminism, to further elucidate how the narrative critiques both colonial legacies and contemporary gender oppression. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of female empowerment in postcolonial African literature and its relevance to ongoing gender struggles in African societies.

Keywords: gender roles, intersectionality, patriarchy, resistance, religion, Stiwanism.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the most prominent contemporary African authors, whose works explore themes of identity, gender, and postcolonial dynamics in Nigerian society. *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is her debut novel, set against the backdrop of a politically unstable postcolonial Nigeria. The novel follows the coming-of-age story of Kambili, a young girl who lives under the authoritarian rule of her father, Papa Eugene, a wealthy businessman and devout Catholic. Through Kambili's eyes, the narrative explores the intersections of familial control, religion, and gender, while critiquing the oppressive structures that govern the lives of women and children in her household.

The central themes of *Purple Hibiscus* include patriarchy, gender roles, religion, and familial dynamics, which are interwoven with the broader postcolonial experience. The novel reflects the tension between tradition and modernity, especially through the character of Papa Eugene, whose rigid interpretation of Catholicism exacerbates his abusive control over his family. At the same time, it delves into the roles assigned to women in Nigerian society, questioning the expectations placed upon them by both cultural tradition and religious authority. These themes make *Purple Hibiscus* a significant text for feminist analysis, particularly within the context of African literature and postcolonial studies.

This paper aims to analyze *Purple Hibiscus* through the lens of African Feminism, particularly drawing from *Stiwanism* by Molaria Ogundipe. *Stiwanism* provides a framework that emphasizes African-specific contexts of gender inequality, where the roles of women are deeply influenced by cultural traditions, colonial legacies, and societal expectations. By applying this feminist theory, the paper will examine the experiences of key female characters in the novel – Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma, and Kambili – focusing on their resistance to patriarchal oppression and their quest for empowerment. The research will highlight how these women navigate the complex intersections of gender, faith, and tradition within a deeply patriarchal society. Additionally, the study will explore how their resistance takes different forms, from subtle acts of defiance to more overt forms of rebellion.

Purple Hibiscus portrays the intersection of faith, femininity, and resistance, offering a powerful critique of patriarchal structures while celebrating women's resilience and agency in oppressive environments. Through the experiences of Kambili, Beatrice, and Auntie Ifeoma, the novel reveals the complexities of female identity in postcolonial Nigeria and critiques the social and familial dynamics that limit women's autonomy. In doing so, Adichie presents a nuanced exploration of the ways in which women resist, adapt, and reclaim their agency, challenging both the patriarchal systems and the religious institutions that perpetuate their subjugation. This paper, therefore, seeks to analyze the role of women in *Purple Hibiscus* through the feminist lens of *Stiwanism*, highlighting the transformative power of resistance within the framework of African cultural traditions.

African Feminism provides a culturally specific lens to analyze the lived experiences of women in African societies, acknowledging the intersections of gender, culture, tradition, and colonial legacies. Within this framework, *Stiwanism* – a term coined by Molaria Ogundipe – advocates for "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa" (Ogundipe 230). Unlike Western feminist ideologies, *Stiwanism* prioritizes the socio-economic and cultural realities of African women, emphasizing the need for collective community advancement alongside gender equity. This approach critiques the imposition of Western frameworks in African contexts, offering instead a nuanced view that incorporates the struggles and agency of African women in navigating patriarchy.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, *Stiwanism* becomes particularly relevant as it underscores the gendered oppression women face within the dual contexts of Nigerian patriarchy and religious orthodoxy. Beatrice's silence and subservience reflect the ingrained expectations of traditional womanhood, while Auntie Ifeoma's independence and progressive views challenge these norms, embodying the transformative potential of African Feminism. As Ogundipe states, "the African feminist must address both cultural specificity and universal gender oppression" (234). This principle resonates with Adichie's portrayal of her female characters navigating deeply entrenched social structures. By employing *Stiwanism*, this analysis highlights the ways in which Adichie critiques these systems while celebrating the resilience and agency of her female characters.

While *Stiwanism* forms the core framework of this study, other feminist theories provide complementary insights into the themes of *Purple Hibiscus*. For instance, Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, explores how overlapping identities – such as gender, class, and religion – shape the oppression of individuals (Crenshaw 1242). This concept is vital in analyzing how Beatrice

and Kambili's experiences of gender inequality are compounded by their roles within a postcolonial, Catholic-dominated Nigerian society.

Similarly, Postcolonial Feminism interrogates the ways colonial histories influence contemporary gender roles, particularly through the imposition of Western religious and cultural ideologies. As Ashcroft et al. explain, "postcolonial feminist theory examines the double colonization of women under both patriarchy and imperialism" (Ashcroft et al. 95). In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa Eugene's adoption of rigid Catholic dogma symbolizes this colonial influence, reinforcing the patriarchal control over his family.

The Feminist Theory of Religion further deepens this critique by analyzing how religious structures can both sustain and challenge gender hierarchies. Ursula King asserts, "Religion has often served to reinforce the subordination of women, but it also holds the potential for profound transformation by offering new spiritual visions and ethical practices" (King 12). This duality is evident in Kambili's evolving relationship with faith. Initially religion operates as a tool of fear and control under her father's authoritarian rule. However, through her exposure to Auntie Ifeoma's freer and more progressive interpretation of Catholicism, faith becomes a source of self-awareness and empowerment, demonstrating the transformative potential that King highlights.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa Eugene represents the epitome of patriarchal authority, using religion as both a shield and a weapon to assert control over his family. His adherence to strict Catholicism, bolstered by his belief in its moral superiority, serves as a justification for his authoritarian behavior. As Adichie depicts, Eugene's view of religion is deeply intertwined with his oppressive tendencies: "He did not tolerate dissent, and in his world, there was no room for mistakes" (Adichie 20). His rigid enforcement of Catholic teachings is rooted in a desire to control every aspect of his family's lives, particularly that of his wife, Beatrice, and children, Kambili and Jaja. The psychological and physical effects of his authoritarianism are apparent in Beatrice's submission and Kambili's fear and repression. Papa Eugene's dominance over the family is framed as an almost religious duty: "He struck her hard enough that she fell to the ground, her mouth gaping, like she was gasping for breath in the airless, heavy silence that always followed his violence" (Adichie 57). Through this, Adichie critiques how religion is distorted to perpetuate patriarchal control, with Papa Eugene using faith as a means to dehumanize those around him.

While religion is employed as a tool of oppression by Papa Eugene, it also holds the potential for resistance and empowerment, particularly for the female characters. Kambili's experience of faith transitions from one of fear to one of moral and spiritual strength. At first, religion is the lens through which she views her father's authority, and her prayers are attempts to appease him: "I prayed that he would be happy with me, so that he would not beat Mama" (Adichie 50). However, as the story progresses, religion becomes a means of inner strength and self-expression, especially as Kambili begins to reconcile her personal beliefs with the oppressive religious framework imposed by her father. Auntie Ifeoma, on the other hand, embodies a more liberating interpretation of faith, one that encourages independence and critical thought. She introduces her niece to a version of Catholicism that emphasizes compassion, freedom, and empowerment, which contrasts with the repressive form practiced by Papa Eugene. Auntie Ifeoma's faith enables her to challenge the patriarchal structures that dominate her life, asserting her agency: "I know God is here with me, always, and he is not a God who will punish me for standing up for what I believe in" (Adichie 180). Through these contrasting depictions of faith, Adichie presents religion not only as a tool for patriarchal subjugation but also as a means of resistance and empowerment for the women who dare to reinterpret it.

Beatrice, the mother of Kambili and Jaja, epitomizes the submissive female role prescribed by the patriarchal structures of Nigerian society. Raised within a system that privileges male authority and religious orthodoxy, Beatrice's role in the family is defined by silence, sacrifice, and enduring abuse.

Her life under Papa Eugene's authoritarian control reflects the traditional expectations of women in many African societies, where obedience and self-effacement are seen as virtuous traits for wives and mothers. Adichie writes, "My mother had learned to silence herself. She had learned to become invisible, to take the blows with silence, to not fight back" (Adichie 31). Beatrice's silence is both a survival mechanism and a result of the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that dictate her subjugation. Despite the physical and emotional toll of this oppression, she remains largely passive, in part due to the influence of the Catholic faith that Papa Eugene so vehemently enforces.

However, Beatrice's act of resistance – poisoning Papa Eugene – marks a significant turning point in her journey. It is an act that both challenges the gendered expectations of submission and asserts her agency in a way that disrupts the oppressive familial structure. This act of defiance, though violent, symbolizes her reclaiming of power after years of suffering in silence. Adichie powerfully captures the complexity of this moment, highlighting the tension between Beatrice's love for her children and the oppressive forces she has been subjected to: "I did it for you, for all of you. I had to stop him, I had to" (Adichie 209). This act of rebellion is not only a rejection of her husband's patriarchal control but also a response to the weight of her mothering role, which had previously been dictated by male authority.

In contrast to Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma represents a feminist role model, embodying independence, education, and a rejection of patriarchal norms. Auntie Ifeoma's character offers a powerful counterpoint to Papa Eugene's rigid, oppressive view of gender roles. She is a woman who balances her career, her role as a single mother, and her commitment to nurturing her children's intellectual and emotional growth. Auntie Ifeoma's progressive values are reflected in her approach to raising her children, encouraging them to think critically and live authentically. She challenges the traditional gender roles that confine women to domestic spheres, teaching her niece Kambili and nephew Jaja the importance of self-expression and intellectual independence. Adichie highlights Auntie Ifeoma's influence on Kambili when she says, "Auntie Ifeoma was the only one who talked to me as though I were a person, not a child or a thing to be controlled" (Adichie 118).

Auntie Ifeoma's progressive views extend to her defiance of patriarchal societal expectations. She is a woman who challenges the norms that seek to silence and subjugate her, rejecting the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her submission to male authority. Her life serves as a model of feminist resistance, one that celebrates education, independence, and the capacity for women to carve their own paths within a patriarchal society.

Kambili's journey from silence to self-expression is central to her coming-of-age narrative. Initially, Kambili embodies the quiet, obedient daughter molded by her father's oppressive control. Her voice is stifled not only by her father but also by the traditional gender roles that demand that women be seen but not heard. In the opening of the novel, Kambili's self-imposed silence is apparent: "I could not imagine talking back to my father. I had never done it" (Adichie 6). Her initial passivity mirrors the societal expectations placed on women to be docile and compliant.

However, Kambili's time spent with Auntie Ifeoma becomes a transformative experience, leading her to question the rigid gender roles she has been taught. Auntie Ifeoma's feminist ideals inspire Kambili to begin asserting herself and find her own voice. Auntie Ifeoma's encouragement fosters Kambili's emotional and intellectual growth, leading to a significant shift in her character. By the novel's conclusion, Kambili no longer seeks to remain invisible but instead actively engages with the world around her: "I had never known I could be this free, this strong, this filled with love" (Adichie 315). Kambili's journey towards self-expression represents the power of resistance against oppressive gender norms, illustrating the profound impact of feminist role models like Auntie Ifeoma on young women's personal growth. Through Kambili's transformation, Adichie explores the potential for

women to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by both family and society, ultimately achieving agency and self-determination.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, resistance manifests in various forms, each reflecting the different ways in which women can assert their agency in the face of patriarchal oppression. Beatrice's ultimate act of resistance – poisoning her husband, Papa Eugene – represents the culmination of years of suffering and silence. Her decision to take such drastic action is a pivotal moment in the novel, demonstrating the extent of her personal transformation and defiance. For years, Beatrice has endured physical and emotional abuse, having been conditioned to accept her subordinate position within the family. However, as the novel progresses, particularly through her interactions with her children and her own internal struggle, Beatrice begins to realize that her submission has not only harmed her but also stifled the potential of her children. Adichie writes, "I had to stop him, I had to" (Adichie 209), capturing Beatrice's justification for her final act of defiance. This act, while violent, signifies Beatrice's reclaiming of power, as she chooses to resist the patriarchal system that has oppressed her for so long.

Aunty Ifeoma, on the other hand, represents a form of resistance that is more public and intellectual. She rejects traditional gender roles and advocates for the education and empowerment of women. Her defiance against the patriarchal structure is evident in the way she challenges societal expectations of women, particularly in her embrace of independence and education. Aunty Ifeoma encourages her children to think critically and question the world around them. Her progressive views inspire Kambili and Jaja, as Aunty Ifeoma encourages them to embrace their individuality and autonomy. When Kambili reflects on Aunty Ifeoma's influence, she says, "Aunty Ifeoma was the only one who talked to me as though I were a person, not a child or a thing to be controlled" (Adichie 118). Through Aunty Ifeoma's example, Kambili begins to recognize that education and self-expression are essential tools for resistance, particularly in a society where women are often relegated to passive roles.

Kambili's gradual defiance against her father's authoritarian control is also a key form of resistance in the novel. Initially, Kambili is obedient and passive, conditioned by her father's harsh, authoritarian rules. However, as she spends more time with Aunty Ifeoma and learns to question the oppressive system at home, she begins to assert herself. Her growing awareness of her own desires and her budding sense of self lead her to challenge her father in small but significant ways. One moment that encapsulates Kambili's shift is when she begins to speak her mind to her father, something she had never done before: "I wanted to speak, to tell him that I was not a child, that I was not his to control" (Adichie 314). This internal act of defiance marks Kambili's transition from passive victim to active participant in her own life, signaling the development of her personal empowerment.

One of the most powerful forms of resistance in *Purple Hibiscus* lies in the collective strength of women, particularly the bond between Aunty Ifeoma and her children, and the influence this dynamic has on Kambili. Aunty Ifeoma fosters a sense of community that empowers her children to resist societal pressures and express their individuality. In contrast to Papa Eugene's isolating control, Aunty Ifeoma's home is a space of shared knowledge, mutual respect, and emotional support. She encourages open dialogue and values education, promoting an environment where each member of the family – especially the women – can grow and challenge the patriarchal structures that seek to constrain them. Aunty Ifeoma's feminist ideals are evident in the way she nurtures her children's development, both intellectually and emotionally. She teaches them that their worth is not defined by traditional gender expectations but by their ability to think critically and act independently.

Kambili's time at Aunty Ifeoma's house represents a significant turning point in her development, as it is here that she is exposed to a community of strong, independent women. The love, support, and intellectual freedom she experiences with Aunty Ifeoma and her children become a source of strength, which ultimately enables Kambili to stand up for herself and challenge her father's authority. In her new environment, Kambili learns that resistance is not only a personal journey but a communal one.

The collective strength of Auntie Ifeoma's family, rooted in shared values of resistance and empowerment, provides Kambili with the courage to embark on her own path toward self-realization. This sense of community, exemplified through the relationships between Auntie Ifeoma and her children, as well as Kambili's growing connection to them, is a testament to the power of solidarity in the face of oppression.

The socio-cultural backdrop of *Purple Hibiscus* is deeply shaped by the legacy of colonialism, which plays a critical role in defining the gender roles and religious practices in postcolonial Nigeria. The colonial period in Nigeria, marked by British rule, left a lasting imprint on the societal structures, particularly in terms of the imposition of Western religious beliefs and patriarchal values. These colonial influences reinforced hierarchical structures that marginalized women and perpetuated gender inequality. The Catholicism introduced by the colonizers, in particular, becomes a tool of patriarchal control within the novel. Papa Eugene, a staunch Catholic, uses his religious beliefs to justify his oppressive treatment of his family, enforcing strict gender roles that confine women to domesticity and obedience. His authoritarian rule is grounded in the belief that his religious convictions entitle him to control every aspect of his children's and wife's lives. Adichie illustrates this dynamic when she writes, "Papa's voice, always firm, always insistent, always the voice of a man who felt he was the sole repository of truth" (Adichie 49). In this quote, Adichie emphasizes Papa Eugene's use of religion not just as a spiritual guide but as a means of asserting patriarchal authority, underscoring the interplay between colonial religious practices and the patriarchal structures that were solidified during and after colonial rule.

The effect of colonialism on gender roles is evident in the way Papa Eugene asserts his dominance and control over his family. The patriarchal hierarchy is internalized by both Papa Eugene and his wife, Beatrice, who, despite her suffering, conforms to the gendered expectations imposed on her by both her husband and the broader socio-cultural system. The enforcement of these roles through religion highlights the manner in which colonialism reinforced and institutionalized patriarchal systems that continue to shape postcolonial Nigerian society. Adichie critiques this in *Purple Hibiscus*, showing how colonial practices continue to dictate the lives of women, reinforcing silence, submission, and religious devotion as the acceptable roles for women in Nigerian society.

The tension between tradition and modernity is a central theme in *Purple Hibiscus*, particularly as it pertains to gender roles and feminist ideals. Adichie presents a society caught between the reverence for traditional customs and the influence of more progressive, feminist ideals that challenge the status quo. This tension is exemplified in the contrasting characters of Papa Eugene and Auntie Ifeoma. Papa Eugene, embodying the traditionalist mindset, seeks to preserve the patriarchal norms of society, often using his religious fervor as a tool to maintain control. In contrast, Auntie Ifeoma represents modernity, embracing education, independence, and self-expression. Auntie Ifeoma's progressive views challenge the gendered expectations placed on women, advocating for a more egalitarian vision where women are free to pursue their intellectual and professional aspirations.

Auntie Ifeoma's home becomes a space where tradition and modernity coexist, yet it is clear that she aligns herself more with progressive ideals, rejecting the traditional patriarchal structure. She encourages her children to pursue education and self-determination, regardless of the limitations imposed by society. Auntie Ifeoma's progressive stance is reflected in her insistence on her children's education as a means of empowerment, particularly for her daughter, who is given the freedom to explore her intellectual potential. In contrast, Papa Eugene's rigid adherence to tradition limits the agency of his family members, particularly the women. When Kambili spends time with Auntie Ifeoma, she is introduced to a new way of thinking, one that combines traditional values with a progressive outlook on women's roles. Adichie writes, "Auntie Ifeoma did not speak in the way Papa spoke. She did not say things like 'you must obey' or 'you are my child'" (Adichie 120). This contrast between Auntie Ifeoma's more liberating approach to family dynamics and Papa Eugene's rigid authoritarianism

highlights the broader struggle between the pull of tradition and the push for modernity, especially with regard to gender roles.

This tension is also reflected in the generational divide between Kambili and her mother, Beatrice. Beatrice, although a product of traditional values, begins to question these norms as she witnesses Auntie Ifeoma's feminist ideals in practice. Through her interactions with Auntie Ifeoma, Kambili comes to realize that women's roles do not have to be defined solely by submission and silence. She internalizes Auntie Ifeoma's progressive views, which allow her to envision a future where women can assert their autonomy and voice. The novel illustrates how the younger generation, exposed to more progressive ideas, navigates the space between tradition and modernity, gradually reshaping their identities and roles in society.

Through these dynamics, Adichie critiques the static nature of tradition and the limitations it imposes on women while celebrating the potential for modernity to offer women the freedom to challenge and reshape patriarchal structures. The interplay between tradition and modernity is not only a reflection of societal change in Nigeria but also an exploration of the possibilities for feminist empowerment in a postcolonial context.

Purple Hibiscus offers a poignant critique of patriarchal oppression and highlights the resilience and agency of women in navigating restrictive gender roles and religious constraints. Through the lens of African Feminism, particularly Stiwanism, the novel provides a culturally grounded understanding of gender dynamics in postcolonial Nigeria. Stiwanism's emphasis on women's empowerment, self-determination, and community support is evident in the experiences of characters like Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma, and Kambili, each of whom confronts patriarchal structures in their own way. Beatrice's eventual resistance, Auntie Ifeoma's progressive ideals, and Kambili's coming of age serve as powerful symbols of feminist empowerment, illustrating how faith, femininity, and resistance intertwine to challenge societal norms. The feminist themes in *Purple Hibiscus* extend beyond the specific Nigerian context, offering broader implications for contemporary gender struggles in African societies. The novel underscores the importance of education, self-expression, and solidarity in the fight against patriarchal oppression, making it not only a critical examination of gender roles in postcolonial Nigeria but also a reflection on the global struggle for women's rights and empowerment. By portraying both the psychological and physical toll of patriarchal control and the transformative power of resistance, Adichie's work continues to resonate with feminist discourse, providing insight into the ongoing challenges faced by women in African societies and beyond.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2003). *Purple hibiscus*. Anchor Books.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2006). *The post-colonial studies reader*. Routledge.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299.
- King, U. (1989). *Women and spirituality: Voices of protest and promise*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ogundipe, M. (1994). Stiwanism: Feminism in an African context. In *Recreating ourselves: African women and critical transformations* (pp. 229–240). Africa World Press.