



Research article

Poetics of Self in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: A Postcolonial *Bildungsroman* Study

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Abstract

This study situates itself in the literary representations of the interplay of gender, class, color, race, postcoloniality, power politics, violence, identity, and the African self in a *Bildungsroman*. It focuses on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a *Bildungsroman* of woman, written from a postcolonial outlook. The narrative centers on the growth, development, and experiences of the female *Bildungsheld*, Kambili, who eventually attains epiphany, and explores her true self and identity. In other words, the study follows an eclectic approach, which further focuses on Kambili's odyssey of encountering freedom by tearing out the different challenges, and insecurities during the process of subjectivization, objectification, and interpellation towards her journey of becoming in a political context of a military coup in Nigeria. As a result, the article emphasizes the confluence of history and literature, as well as Africans' experiences in the postcolonial world in general, and accounts for Kambili's becoming in particular.

Keywords: Gender, Female *Bildungsroman*, Patriarchy, Postcolonialism, Self



[Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions](#)

The real tragedy of our postcolonial world is not that the majority of people had no say in whether or not they wanted this new world; rather, it is that the majority have not been given the tools to negotiate this new world. (Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, 2006).

The time has come to reevaluate the rights that claim to have been bestowed upon the voiceless, marginalized, oppressed, colonized, and other subaltern categories who need them. But are these rights still committed to what they were originally intended to be, or are they just written down? In response, these rights are only partially implemented and internally include turpitudes like gender inequity, subordination, power politics, violence, etc. While modernism and postmodernism were two distinct cultures at a global level, with similar aesthetics, attitudes toward sex, race, class, self-image, and so on, the postcolonial age is a testament to the unaccustomed combination of race and migration that make up much of the current literary landscape. The postcolonial study includes the exploration of the subaltern and the minority

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groups. A colonial history carves the major part of a postcolonial subject and leads to an arrested sense of development of self and subjectivity. It further explores the relationship between a master and a slave, the minority and the majority, the centre and periphery, and self and other. In such an environment, the voiceless cannot make their own decisions. Their lives are reduced to that of a voiceless object. The question then arises as to whether everyone, regardless of class, colour, gender, race, religion, etc. is accorded equal rights in all fields and if the sole requirements for being eligible for any chance are one's ability or inability. Thus, we see that for people to soar beyond the socio-pragmatic barriers, they must stand up for their civil rights and fight for themselves if those rights are violated.

Throughout millennia, the synchronic and diachronic study of the self has gone through several spectrums. Nearly everything has undergone a significant metamorphosis, including global apocalypses, the harsh realities of stagflation and economic depression, political instability, the extraordinary advancement of science and technology, and cultural change. Therefore, it is imperative to consider that everything that makes up the self—consciousness, episteme, subjectivity, identity, and ideology—has undergone an unfathomable alteration. Such a transformation can be seen as far as the building of 'self' is concerned in the postcolonial society. The modern deconstructive world negates the postcolonial self-schemata in the colonies and provides a hope of freedom and apprenticeship for the self.

Humanism, Behaviouralism, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism, Marxism, Modernism, Postmodernism, Aestheticism, Empiricism, Feminism, and Existentialism have all been inspired by the concept of self and identity. Over time, a surfeit of ideas attempted to understand the boundaries between subjectivity and self. Self and identity were first presented during the classical era when man was at the surface through the integration of society. All doctrines and speeches originated from the Godhead and authorities. 'Absoluteness' rejects the idea of uniqueness. 'Renaissance' resurgence promoted rationality and a contemporary perspective. But the modernist stance over rationalized and bureaucratized the nineteenth century. The capitalist and industrialist era construed a materialist subject as Marxism suggests that the economic and political powers also construct ideology. In continuation, Postmodernism and Poststructuralism emphasize historical consciousness in the discourse of self, subjectivity, and identity of a postcolonial individual. Both the models of aesthetic attainment as aesthetic-spiritual and socio-pragmatic, *Bildung* does not find ground in the postcolonial African context because the social conditions of a colonial subject are inimical both to the freedom necessary for *Bildungsheld* to flourish, and self-cultivation, at the same time for institutions which would encourage a viable social subject. The process of socialization subsumes subjectification, dehumanization, and alienation as far as the condition of the colonial subject is concerned. French and Americans proffered a socio-aesthetic model as their counterpart of the German idealist *Bildungsroman*. This model of development and integration served the emergent nation to maintain the cooperation between two centripetal forces: centralizing the nation-state and centring its citizen subject as Joseph R. Slaughter asserts in *Enabling Fictions and Novel Subjects: The Bildungsroman and International Human Rights Law* (2006). *Bildungsroman* rendered a new pattern of narration to the citizen subject of the new bourgeois nation-state with its egalitarian vision. And the plot for the previously marginalized people as democratic citizen-subject. Fredric Jameson in *Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* (1986) articulates that "all third-world texts are

necessarily... to be read as ...the story of the private individual destiny that is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society" (Jameson, 1986, pp. 65-88). It also emphasized that third-world classics 'consists of exclusively of *Bildungsromane*'. The critique of *Bildung* in a colonial setting introduces a foreign discourse, therefore colonial *Bildung* is considered as self-conscious role-playing, in which the colonial subject finds themselves alienated from the traditional goal of classical *Bildungsroman*, which leads to a subversive mimicry rather than a sincere imitation. Homi K. Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* (1994) provides that mimicry:

constitutes a form of colonial discourse that is uttered *inter dicta*: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 89).

Further, G. Castle in *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (2006) argues that:

In the colonial *Bildungsroman*, the harmony of inner and outer worlds that is the aim of the classical form is displaced and reconfigured as inner split, a dehiscence in the normative concept of bildung and its dialectical will to harmony in which the disavowed colonial subject speaks dissonantly from an open, ambivalent, nonuniversal but immanent perspective. (Castle, 2006, p. 129).

The self is replaced by 'Subject' in the postcolonial and postmodern discourse because in a contemporary era, the discourse of self, subject, and identity is conceived as a product of subjectification by its political, cultural, historical, and economic realities. The postcolonial subject represents an 'immanent critic' who negates the identity which is balanced and affirmed on its 'other'. The Postcolonial narratives endeavor to recuperate the pre-colonial language, tradition, and knowledge system from the shadow of colonial-sponsored literature. The free play between the centre and the periphery deconstructs the structure of colonial power. Post-colonial literature covers a wide range of narratives and underscores some models and themes. Some thematic commonalities in post-colonial writings such as the use of allegories, celebrating the struggle, magic realism, discontinuous narratives, and exile (specifically in the black community). The postcolonial narrative is an attempt at 'decolonization' critically analyzed by structuralists, post-structuralists, and Marxists. L. Althusser in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus* (1970) and Jameson in his *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) agree to the idea that colonizer through apparatuses forms the ideology of the colonial subject. Structuralist has a different standpoint as Edward W. Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) exposes the textuality where the concept of 'Europe and Other' is entertained. Poststructuralist explores a contemporary idea of 'free play' where no culture and tradition is considered to be original. Cultures, traditions, ideologies, and identities all are hybrid as supported by Bhabha and Spivak.

Making decisions that eventually cause a person to develop a sense of self—a process of unbecoming that is typified in Euro-American literature classified as *Bildungsroman*. Marc Redfield in *Phantom Formations: Aesthetic Ideology and the Bildungsroman* (1996) observes that "the more [the bildungsroman] is cast into question, the more it flourishes" (Redfield, 1996, p. 42). Likewise, the development of a character depends mostly upon the level of their suppression and silence. It's something similar to Keats's idea of 'Negative Capability', which he used while writing a letter to his brother, inspired by a couple of poets and dramatists including Spencer and

Shakespeare. It is a situation in which the person/artist is in a state of uncertainty, conflict, confusion, and doubt, which leads him/her to a mystical situation and there comes the development. The plot of *Bildungsroman* portrays a young man going through the world experiencing tribulations which further helps in his development of self. Pramod K. Nayar suggests that the postcolonial life writing genre can discern the functional equivalent of the *Bildungsroman* but as an immanent critique. The postcolonial subject deals with, as Adorno calls in *Negative Dialectics* (1966) the 'Immanent Critique'; "One that allows for more sensitive negotiations of complex problems concerning identity, nationality, education, the role of an artist and social as well as personal relationship" (Adorno, 1966, p. 3) explains Gregory Castle in *Reading Modernist Bildungsroman* (2006). This kind of 'Immanent Critique' is in charge of Postcolonial *Bildungsroman*. Brian O. Connor in his work *Adorno* (2012), suggests that Adorno on the method of immanent critique endorses both Marx's theory of contradictions which contrives the structure of the society, and Hegel's idea of criticizing society on the standards of rationality immanent within social practice as one unified conception. He also believes that the promise of independent subjectivity is the most important immanent standard in today's society. Trent Schroyer in *The Critique of Domination: The Origins and Development of Critical Theory* (1973) describes Immanent critique as a means of restoring 'actuality to false appearance' by first describing "what a social totality holds itself to be, and then confronting it with what it is becoming" (Schroyer, 1973, p. 52). Further, Max Horkheimer in his work *Eclipse of Reason* (1974) claims that immanent criticism defines the historical dialectic that is driven by tensions between ideology and actuality. And, the *Bildungsroman* presents an 'immanent critique' of the existing realities in the colonial and postcolonial context. Hence, it becomes preeminent to interrogate the possibility of creating a protagonist who experiences *Bildung* but rejects the classical conventions of the *Bildungsroman* genre. The study analyzes and revisits the genre where a *Bildung* can cultivate itself along with all complexities, dialectics, and paradoxes. The *Bildungsroman* deals with the process of education, growth, development, and maturity of the protagonist. As it is already explained, these realities do keep on changing and hence the reality of self is also bound to change. The study intends to examine how the change in these factors has entailed profoundly in the making of the self as far as the modern black novel in the context is concerned. Further, it also highlights how the protagonist Kambili attains a sense of self and subjectivity and constitutes her identity.

As a postcolonial writer, Adichie satisfies practically every requirement at once. She is a writer from 'a country with a history of colonialism', Nigeria, which was once a British colony; second, she moved to the United States for education; and third, she is descended from a migrant family, as his ancestors were indentured labourers who arrived in Trinidad from India, both of which were once British colonies. Similarly, Robert Young in *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001) points out that:

Postcolonial theory is always concerned with the positive and negative effects of the mixing of peoples and cultures, whether it be through colonial domination and the transmutation of indigenous cultures, or the hybridization of domestic metropolitan cultures as a result of immigration. (Young, 2001, p. 69)

In continuation, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Role of Literature in Modern Africa" (2010), encapsulates the experience of many formerly colonized people, stating:

We are a people conditioned by our history and by our place in the modern world to look towards 'somewhere else' for validation, to see ourselves as inhabitants of the periphery. I am not merely referring to political expressions like 'Third World', but to the phenomenon of being outside the centre in ways more subtle than mere politics, in ways metaphysical and psychological. (Adichie, 2010, p. 90)

The hindsight in the context can aptly be observed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). Combining two contrastive theories, that is, Postcolonialism and *Bildungsroman*, the novel maintains a balance between and shows how the former situation leads the character to achieve the second. Papa Eugene as a 'colonial product', embodies epistemic violence and holds all the colonial practices running behind the boundaries of family, and outside stands a well-reputed, ideally furnished, man of honour who uses his vast wealth to support his friends and relatives, charities, and his catholic church.

Patriarchy and the history of suppression act as the base that influences the ontological reality and epistemological process of female self-formation. Her self and subjectivity have been structured by the economic, cultural, political, societal, and linguistic 'Base and Superstructures', as rightly used by Karl Marx, what Antonio Gramsci calls 'Political and Civil Society', and further L. Althusser categorizes these agents under 'Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses'. Patriarchy is the dominant force in society, particularly for women. Women in colonial countries are subject to triple oppression, while black women in colonial colonies are subject to even fourfold oppression, as sometimes, the majority of white women also override the will of black women, together with white and black men. However, in the twenty-first century, women are beginning to speak up, choosing their paths, taking charge of their destinies, and pursuing their aspirations. The decolonizing postcolonial feminist perspectives of the book can best be seen in the character of the African woman Auntie Ifeoma and her methods of resistance to patriarchy and violence.

Since the 20th century, there has been a revival of interest in the genre of *Bildungsroman* in the global south. Post-colonial writers and thinkers from Asia, Europe, and Africa, as well as those from New Zealand, have used the genre to explore themes of belonging, self-determination, cultural identity, and spiritual growth. African writers and thinkers from the diaspora have found the genre to be a useful tool for exploring revolutionary and radical social movements, as well as the socio-political changes that have taken place in the field. Similarly, Igbo writers have also utilized the genre to explore the tensions between modernity and tradition that confront Igbo youth today in Africa. Critical theory has also been influenced by these literary works. The *Bildungsroman* contains an influential paradigm that, according to human rights expert Joseph Slaughter, normalizes the story of enfranchisement by elevating socially marginalized persons to representative status. In tracing the divergence of contemporary Black British fiction from classical literary patterns, post-colonialist Mark Stein has contended that the postcolonial *Bildungsroman* is better understood as a novel of adaptation and transformation than as a work of formation and development.

As we saw, the concept of *Bildungsroman* comes from the history of German idealism: a set of ideas proposed by the Germans regarding art, literature, human life, and mind. It explains the process of becoming, which constructs the epistemological realities of the protagonist however,

the presence of aporias and antinomies is always there in the process of becoming because the *Bildungsheld* grows and develops in the atmosphere of bricolage, parody, slippage, lacuna, medley, pastiche, and multiplicity of reality. As a result, many black female writers have sought a way to articulate their individual experiences in a way that allows them to assert their place in the social hierarchy as fully formed, self-sufficient, capable, and creative individuals. To do this, they have adopted a traditional male novelistic format, known as *Bildungsroman*. However, to better represent their own cultural and historical backgrounds, these writers of black women's literature have discovered that they must also alter the conventional Euro-American masculine literary structure. For these authors, this kind of writing serves to recalculate and erase the barriers of impossibility that black women face by enshrining not only individual subjectivity but also a collective experience particular to the historical and geographic setting.

A critical history of the genre demonstrates that its cultural and ideological roots are altered and questioned by the writers who have adopted the genre of *Bildungsroman* writing outside of the genre's classical confinements. A critical history of the genre indicates that as it is taken by writers who exist and write outside of the genre's traditional boundaries, its cultural and ideological underpinnings have been altered as well as questioned. First Nations writers employ *Bildungsroman* to examine how colonization affected indigenous identity and culture. It is also used by postcolonial writers to reclaim and reassert lost histories and identities, as a means of healing both on an individual and collective level. Postcolonial writers use the genre to illustrate the effects of culturally sanctioned sexual violence on the developing personality. For instance, the author of the female *Bildungsroman* chronicles the difficulties women have in overcoming societal conventions that are deeply ingrained in patriarchy, as well as the abuse they endure at home and the disapproval they encounter when they advocate for their well-being. The violence and displacement of civil war also have a similar impact on the identities of soldiers, as these texts chronicle the 'war Bildung' in which young men are taught how to be and identify as soldiers. Ultimately, the postcolonial version of the genre is about survival - both beautiful and challenging, but always truthful.

Women's silence in literature and everyday life is frequently a reaction to the social and cultural norms and constraints they were raised with. Specifically, the limitations imposed by race, gender, and class prevent black women from fully expressing their path toward self-actualization. In our history, the problem of Black women's voices being silenced has been troublesome. Racism has historically suppressed African-American men, whereas African-American women experience distinct forms of silencing because of their gender and race. It has been said that a combination of the issues outlined by G. C. Spivak and Carole Boyce Davies on the concept of Miriam Gyimah's 'Selective Hearing or Mis-hearing' is the reason why critics in the post-colonization world have questioned the ability of subaltern women's capacity to speak. On the other hand, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Kambili* makes the argument that this is the product of several factors, each of which has complicated and evolving meanings. It is feasible for one individual to experience both voicelessness and silence, especially as time goes on and situations shift. The main character of the book, *Kambili*, is unable to express herself due to her father's abuse, which has taken away her ability to communicate and has mostly hidden her unique individuality. As a result, she suffers from this. She can speak out of fear occasionally, though, and people frequently misunderstand what she says. They either fail to comprehend the meaning of her words or fail to comprehend

the significance of her silence, which is amplified by her words. They fail to understand the discrepancy between her words and her subconscious intentions or feelings. Her classmates refer to her as a "backyard snob" (Adichie, 2003, p. 49) and other adults describe her as "quiet" and "shy" (Adichie, 2003, p. 57, 139) and fail to comprehend the struggle that is occurring beneath her words.

Kambili's silence is not absolute. It is filled with mumbling, muttering, and coughing that reveal the physical manifestations of her fear, which she refers to as her "tongue-tiedness" (Adichie, 2003, p. 49). When Kambili attempts to communicate, her throat constricts and words refuse to come. She is afraid of her papa's reprisal, and his implicit instruction that she should keep the family secrets to herself. Further, when she does not perform well in school, Kambili experiences a "hard lump like a poorly made fufu forming in the throat" (Adichie, 2003, p. 52) every time she takes a test, as she fears her father will punish her. Her linguistic isolation is further accentuated by her brother and mother, whose helplessness allows Eugene to perpetrate his violence. The Achike family is trapped behind their high compound, protected not only from external political violence but also from those who may have been able to help them. Kambili does not communicate her thoughts or feelings while she is with her cousins and classmates. Her father's influence on her is too strong, the secrets are too dark, and there are too many things that cannot be shared. Consequently, she is left with a voiceless voice. Her sole competent communication partner is her brother, Jaja. They do not need words to communicate, as they have a "asusu anya, a language of the eyes," (Adichie, 2003, p. 305), the language of their eyes that allows them to express what cannot be expressed verbally. She is oblivious to her sentiments and identity; her subjective state is preoccupied with pleasing her father. When Kambili speaks to her father and earns his approval, she feels completely fulfilled, and her mouth is full of melted sugar, as in the novel she utters "as though my mouth were full of melting sugar" (Adichie, 2003, p. 26). When Papa Eugene offers her tea, Kambili feels "the love burn my tongue" (Adichie, 2003, p. 31). Even the thought of his absence makes her throat tighten with fear (Adichie, 2003, p.108).

Yet Kambili starts to discover a different world when she and her brother go to live with her aunt. Although her cousins are not financially successful, they are wealthy in their beliefs. They all "seemed to simply speak and speak and speak" (Adichie, 2003, p. 120) Kambili observes, and questions how Amaka, who is also fifteen, "opened her mouth and had words flow easily out" (Adichie, 2003, p. 99). She gets more chances to voice her ideas at her aunt's house, which is represented by a rare purple hibiscus. The changed environment provides a ray of hope, freedom, and possibility to both the siblings (Kambili and Jaja); using Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, their polyvocal speech interrupts and stands against the dominance of Papa Eugene's speech. Their conversation flows easily and makes Kambili more self-aware. Providing an insight into the postcolonial hybridity, she initially used to believe everything that her father teaches her, but after visiting Nsukka and being exposed to a different culture and way of thinking, she begins to question her father's convictions and tactics. As a result, she starts to question her father's rigid adherence and dogmatism to his beliefs, and the binary system she was raised in breaks down. Kambili's visit to Nsukka provides an opportunity for her to display sensitivity to the culture that gives her people their identity. Nsukka is not just rich in Igbo culture and traditions, but it is also a place where Kambili loves the energy Ifeoma provides and elaborates on 'Mmuo' ideals. Not only is Nsukka spiritually nourishing, but it is also the source of Kambili's laughter, as she explains,

"I smiled, run, and laugh" (Adichie, 2003, p. 180). There, she can break free from Christian norms and proclaim her Nigerian identity. She becomes acquainted with her people's way of life, particularly in terms of her first-hand experience preparing native food recipes such as 'orah' soup in Aunt Ifeoma's home. As a hybrid figure, Kambili is seen juggling the principles of the church and cultural tradition while at Nsukka. Kambili's delayed development leads to a psychological state of crossing to the ground, as Lashgiri interprets Anzaldua's concept of crossing or 'travesta'. By disregarding the norms of her father's didactic world, she discovers a way to speak for herself and become the writer of her narrative. She discovers her 'resonant voice', as Peter Elbow refers to the voice that fully transmits unconscious intentions and emotions. According to Peter Elbow in *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* (1988), to speak with a reverberating voice, the person must primarily deconstruct the "acceptable self" (Elbow, 1981, p. 301), which is constructed to gain approval from others. As she rejects the pseudo-self that she has created for her father, Kambili commences to reveal herself without him. Kambili's background is characterized by a quiet, domineering, and predictable life. She is aware of the difficulties faced by individuals and excels at her studies. Due to her father's restrictions, she is not exposed to the external world. However, upon her arrival in Nigeria, she gradually begins to comprehend some of the problems encountered in the country. When she encounters Father Amadi, she realizes that she is a woman and that her story is being told through her. Although she experiences a great deal of grief during her transition, she eventually gains the courage and confidence to tell her story. Kambili's journey towards the future is a slow, steady, and determined one, as is the case in Nigeria.

On their journey back to Enugu, Jaja presents the purple hibiscus plant as a symbol of freedom, while Kambili presents the incomplete portrait of Papa Nnukwu. The artwork symbolizes the development of her relationship with her grandfather, aunt Ifeoma, and father Amadi. Her father's reaction when he discovers that the painting has been brought home by her children is one of shock, as he is aware that it represents his father's traditional beliefs and lack of democracy. When he realizes that his influence is deeply ingrained in his children's lives, he becomes increasingly harsh, leading to Kambili's refusal to allow him to do so. The laying position of the picture as a "child in the uterus" (Adichie, 2003, p. 210), implies Kambili's rebirth after this incident. The structure of the house now reflects the evolution and change that has taken place in the home of Aunt Ifeoma. Despite her father's instruction to rise from the ground, she does not truly feel the impact of his beating since she is closer to the artwork, which represents her ancestral culture. As the novel records:

The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself together around the piece of painting, they were soft feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. (Adichie, 2003, p. 221).

Kambili's refusal to conform to her father's intolerant religious beliefs demonstrates her ability to break away from her past social and religious habits. When Eugene finds out that Kambili has been sleeping in the same bedroom as Nnukwu, he attempts to soothe her with hot water, however, this does not produce any results. She no longer listens to her father and has now come to understand her own culture. Her experience in Nigeria has shaped her, allowing her to become familiar with traditional Igbo cuisine, peel yams, and partake in Igbo festivals. This has brought

her closer to the culture of the region. The novel begins and ends with a silence, yet the silence is distinct from beginning to end.

The paper thus uncovers the way Kambili encounters her conflicting self under the prevailing pull within the framework of postcolonial female *Bildungsroman*. It also shows how she reconstructs her own identity by negotiating the different challenges in an anti-developmental postcolonial environment during the process of colonial oppression, subjectivization, objectification, and interpellation in her journey of becoming. The novel in this context successfully traces the journey of Kambili and how she becomes an epiphanic empath throughout. After experiencing the structure of post-coloniality - an orthodox catholic father - in the novel, the way she manages to trespass on the road of awakening is what makes her a female *Bildung*.

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