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Interpreting the Silence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

*“All profound things and emotions of things
are preceded and attended by silence.” - Herman Melville (152).*

Different people react differently towards abuses. Silence is a way of expressing the pain caused by the abuses. When people become frustrated, they use their silence as a weapon to face or subdue the issues. The present study attempts to interpret a similar kind of silence of the Achikes in the novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The Achikes face pain and silently suffer at the hands of Eugene Achike, the head of the family. The pain is caused by the fanatic adherence of the foreign religion by the converted Igbo people.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Family, Purple Hibiscus, Silence.

1. Introduction

Through her fifteen-year-old protagonist Kambili, Adichie unravels the silent pain and sufferings. Kambili adores her father Eugene Achike, who is a staunch Roman Catholic and follows its doctrine rigidly. He thrusts his religious belief onto his family members harshly, which hurts them. He deals his family in cruelly that makes them suffer in silence. When the family members fail to obey the catholic doctrines, they are punished most brutally. Eugene Achike is the breadwinner of the family and dominates the entire house. Only his voice is heard in the entire house while other speak very rarely to each other. Eugene draws a schedule for his children and they had to follow it strictly. The family comes together for breakfast, lunch and dinner and eat in silence. Only Eugene speaks to his family members while the others eat their food in silence.

Beatrice, the wife of Eugene is silenced due to her husband's domestic abuse. She rarely converses to her children as she is mostly lost in her own thoughts and unhappiness. She cannot voice out her problems to her husband as his male dominance suppresses her. He provides the best for his family but never cares for their emotional wellbeing. He never asks his wife about her desires or cares for her interest. Beatrice has sacrificed all her interests and has made her husband the centre of her focus. Her

life revolves around him and his needs. Twice her foetus gets aborted due to her husband's anger and irrational behaviour.

Once when Beatrice refused to get down from the car to greet the parish priest due to her morning sickness, she is beaten up mercilessly by her husband. She is hit so bad that her pregnancy gets aborted. Kambili and Jaja witness this heart wrecking incident in silence. They see their father carrying their mother on his shoulder to the hospital with blood dripping on the floor. Both of them clean the blood on the floor in silence and do not share their thoughts, and they suffer in silence.

Similarly, Beatrice does not reveal the problems she faces with her husband to anyone and suffers in silence. Only once she reveals her husband's abusive nature to Ifeoma who advises her to leave her husband. From then on, she becomes secretive about her sufferings. She is very loyal to her husband and she does not even share her sufferings with her children. She experiences a lot of physical violence from her husband which has led her to become very silent. Kambili watches her mother speak slowly and "She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts." (Adichie 20). Kambili compares Beatrice's bare and pale lips with aunty Ifeoma's, which is covered with bronze coloured lipstick.

Kambili and Jaja speaks through their eyes as they are scared to talk loudly. They are allowed to speak only when they are supposed to answer to Eugene's questions. Kambili has been made so silent that words get stuck to her mouth even when she has to answer her father, she is unable to speak because she shudders in fear.

Kambili has always had her own room and remains in the room except during meal time. Even in school everyone thought she is proud and arrogant but she is actually a very timid child and never speaks to anyone and the problem is that her father never gave her opportunity to speak. Thus, she is left isolated in school without friends. Her father never realises that he is ruining his children's lives. Her father's temper had a negative impact on her that she becomes silent and is sacred to initiate a conversation with others. When Kambili meets her cousins for the first time at Nsukka she is unable to speak to them because she has not moved with anyone else apart from her own family members. When Kambili and Jaja visits Aunty Ifeoma's family Kambili is unable to speak much to her cousins. Her words always got caught in her mouth and expects her aunt to save her. Her cousin Amaka questions Kambili "Is this how you wash plates in your house? Or is plate washing not included in your fancy schedule. I stood there, staring at her, wishing Aunty Ifeoma were there to speak for me" (Adichie 140).

Jaja also undergoes abuses at his father's hands and is also found lost in thoughts like his mother. He rarely speaks to his family and never leaves his room much. Kambili speaks of their silence when Papa Eugene asks them to pass the salt cellar. Jaja and Kambili reach out simultaneously but in silence and Jaja lets go of his hand and Kambili passes the salt cellar to her father but nobody speaks and silence continues to hover over the dining table. Jaja like Kambili never speaks much and prefers to stay alone. Jaja and Kambili shared a special bond and often understood each other's silence. They enjoyed the company of each other even when there is nothing much left to talk. Kambili adores her brother and observes his silence and his sufferings that he too faced at his father's hands. Once Jaja's finger is damaged by his father for not answering a couple of questions in his catechism exam. Jaja's little finger on the left is chosen by his father and jams it hard that it is left damaged for the rest of his life. Everyone who meets Jaja inquiries about his little finger and got a vague reply form him as he did not speak much about it to anyone.

Aunty Ifeoma is Eugene's sister visits the family after a long time along with her children. She is a widow who raises the family alone by working at Nsukka University. The Christian Missionaries also raise her but unlike her brother she shows respect to the traditional Igbos. She takes care of Papa - Nnukwu and does not mind about his religious practices. Aunty Ifeoma and her children take up Kambili and Jaja. During Christmas time she takes all the children to the Masquerades along with Papa- Nnukwu who explains the significance of each Mmuo. That night Kambili sleeps peacefully as she has spent her time with her grandfather and cousins for the first time, a break from her strict father who glued them to their studies and Bible and rarely speaks to them. Kambili dreams of herself that night laughing

although she is not aware of how the sound of her laughter might sound because she has never laughed in her life time.

When Kambili goes to Nsukka to stay in her cousin's house she starts discovering herself. Through Amaka she realizes that life long she has been lowering her voice while speaking to others. When she tries to converse with Amaka's friends she is unable to speak as the words never flowed out of her mouth.

Kambili discovers how her aunt's house reverberated with laughter and voices. "Laughter always rang out in Aunt Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms" (Adichie 140). At the dining table no one is silent every one shares their ideas and opinions. Kambili finds it amusing to be seated at her aunts dining table where there is life and happiness unlike her house where everyone is supposed to eat in silence. Although there are various dishes on the plate back at Kambili's house there is no happiness. Only a meagre amount of food is shared in her aunt's house yet happiness surrounded the dining table. Kambili observes the difference between her house and her aunts house silently and finds her aunt's house more comfortable and congenial than her own home.

Kambili and Jaja choose to be silent rather than retaliating their aggressive father. Eugene is a kind man but he loses his temper when his family cross him. Each time Eugene drinks his tea he offers the first sip to Jaja and Kambili and calls it 'love sips'. Every time Kambili took a love sip it burnt her tongue. He gave them the best but at the same time he physically abused them and somewhere in between the love sip and the physical abuse he lost his family due to his irrational behaviour.

Jaja slowly begins to use his silence against his father's abusiveness. He begins to ignore his father and thus starts to retaliate. Once Eugene happens to bring a newly launched beverage from his factory and asks his family members opinion. Beatrice and Kambili appreciate the new drink, while Jaja takes leave without uttering a word. His father gets very upset and angry at Jaja's behaviour and his silence shocks Eugene. Eugene questions Jaja and his reply leaves him dumbfound "Have you nothing to say, gbo, Jaja?" Papa asked again. "Mba, there are no words in my mouth," Jaja replied. (10)

Yet in another incident Eugene stamps and hits Kambili violently for possessing a painting of her grandfather. When Kambili's father finds out Kambili holding the painting he tears it into pieces and Kambili falls to the ground to save the painting. She is unable to defend herself as words do not come out of her mouth. She is hit aggressively that she almost loses her life. Her ribs are broken and her body bruised completely and is admitted in the hospital in an unconscious state. Her father's temper and violence have an adverse impact on her speech pattern. Yet Kambili's silence at that point is a part of her retaliation where she fights silently to save her grandfathers picture. She stands up for herself for the first time against her father's cruelty and abuse. Her silence becomes so meaningful and powerful that she defeats her father's religious ideologies.

Beatrice endures her husband's abuses patiently from the beginning of the novel. She hides her sufferings and pain and also watches her children suffer silently. She does not show any anger or frustration to anyone. When Kambili's ribs are broken she cries silently and reaches a saturation point. She sends her children away to Nsukka and slowly begins to poison her husband's food. Her silence achieves meaning when she hears the news of her husband's death. Initially she exhibits her silence to show her loyalty to her husband and towards the end of the novel her silence is used to emancipate herself and her children from her aggressive partner.

2. Conclusion

Thus, Eugene's aggressive behaviour and his destructive anger leads to his own wife poisoning him. His anger and his blind faith in religion makes him insensitive and leads him to commit inhumane acts. His inhumane act has an adverse effect on his family members. Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja are suppressed and silenced by Eugene due to his viciousness. Each of the family members suffers silently

and does not even have the opportunity to console each other. Gradually towards the middle of the novel the characters undergo metamorphosis they begin to change their silence and pain to retaliate. Kambili and Jaja begin to ignore their father and do not show concern when he falls sick. Beatrice poisons his food silently as she is unable to put up with her husband's destructive behaviour. Silence, when reaches its limit, turns into a powerful armament.

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