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Delgado Ordás, Álvaro; Hand, Felicity, dir. Submission and resistance : archetypes of contemporary nigerian women in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and The thing around your neck. 2015. 20 pag. (801 Grau en Estudis Anglesos)

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**Submission and Resistance:**  
**Archetypes of Contemporary Nigerian Women in**  
**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and**  
***The Thing Around Your Neck***

TFG Estudis Anglesos

Supervisor: Dr Felicity Hand

Álvaro Delgado Ordás

June 2015

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper offers an insight into a variety of female characters taken from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* and her short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, focusing on “Imitation”, “Jumping Monkey Hill” and “The Arrangers of Marriage”. These characters, after being contextualized in a postcolonial environment, are analyzed in terms of gender subjugation, exploring the amount of freedom they enjoy and the opportunities for liberation they can access, finding elements of both submission and resistance in most of them. Also, possible symbols or connections to recent African history are examined, in order to give domestic stories a bigger meaning.

**Keywords:** Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. *Purple Hibiscus*. *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Nigeria. Submission. Resistance. Gender. Sexism. Africa.

## 1. Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and her short story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009)<sup>1</sup> are two examples of contemporary Nigerian narratives which have become globally famous. Having publicly declared herself a feminist on several occasions, Adichie depicts in her writing a spectrum of women which will serve to provide a feminist critical reading of the archetypes, situations and representation that account for the basis of this paper. Secondly, it is also possible to trace the likely symbolical meanings in these characters as outcomes of their country’s recent history as well as images of hope for the near future. Set in a postcolonial context of political conflict and recent civil war, both books offer an opportunity to attend an uncommonly heard voice, that of a black, African, female. Through female characters in these stories, it is possible to glimpse Nigerian

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<sup>1</sup> In following references to the author’s Works, *Purple Hibiscus* will be referred to as PH and *The Thing Around Your Neck* as TTYAN

recent history and the cultural hybridity of different ethnicities, religions and ultimately the persistence of Western influences. All these facts strengthen the importance of analyzing Adichie's narratives.

Women in the author's stories have a very powerful presence; they adopt different roles and enjoy diverse degrees of empowerment. In order to provide a critical reading of this myriad of women, it is necessary to construct the analysis in terms of a continuum of characters taken from *PH* and the short stories in *TTAYN*. At one extreme, we find the most submissive, like Kambili's Mama in *PH* or Nkem in the short story "Imitation" and Chinaza in the short story "The Arrangers of Marriage", both included in *TTAYN* and at the other, the most empowered, such as Aunt Ifeoma and her daughter Amaka in *PH*. However, as in any continuum, there is a large number of inbetweeners, female characters who enjoy a certain degree of empowerment and freedom but who also suffer from the patriarchal society they live in. Examples for this go from Kambili in *PH* to Ujunwa in the short story "Jumping Monkey Hill". The classification is somewhat opaque, and Adichie tends to let her female characters gain power and self-consciousness throughout the narratives and oppose the institutions that hold them back, which go from marriage and abusive husbands to religion and the leftovers of the colonial time and the Biafran War. This fluidity in the approach of the female characters to the gender problematic highlights the complexity of a feminist reading and reminds us of the dangers of oversimplification.

The aim of this paper is to provide a feminist critical reading of a range of female characters in Adichie's stories and prove them to be archetypes of different realities concerning Nigerian women and ultimately symbols that stand for the past and the

future of Nigeria and/or Africa. The intention of the paper is also to offer an insight of the historical roots of the major conflicts that Adichie's female characters suffer from and conclude with the fluidity that exists in these characters' approach to their own problematic and how a lot of them take the opportunity of empowerment that Adichie grants them, offering a ray of hope for the present and also future generations of Nigerian women.

## **2. Traditional Roles, Sexism and Gender Violence in Adichie's Nigeria**

In order to understand this analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's characters, we must take into account the existing patriarchal system and submission of women in African societies and in particular, in Nigerian society. The roots of this phenomenon are unclear, and there is an ongoing debate about whether it started with the influence of Western culture during colonial rule or it already existed in African societies. Katherine Frank establishes that there is a "historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society" (Frank, 1987: 15). On the origins of the subjugation of women in Africa, Mineke Schipper states that

the replacement of traditional ideas by Western ones has not proved to be a guarantee for the amelioration of women's position. On the contrary, they may have only served to strengthen ideas which many African creation and origin myths already contained. (Schipper, 1987: 37)

Sexism has been and still is very present in contemporary African societies and references to it are very powerful in Adichie's realistic fiction. Particularly, many of her female characters present details that can be traced back to this problematic. In her narratives, the author is giving a critical insight of the reality in Nigeria and exposing the problematic of gender in her country through these characters.

To begin with, Kambili's mother, a central character in Adichie's *PH*, can be taken as one of the most clearly submissive, disempowered female characters. She is presented in the novel as a submissive wife, eager to please her husband and also afraid of the consequences of disobeying him. Her construction as a character is that of a woman who knows and accepts the subaltern position that has been imposed on her. She takes the role of the child raiser and housewife in her relationship and states very clearly the limits that restrain her: "So you say. A woman with children and no husband, what is that? [...] A husband crowns a woman's life, Ifeoma. It is what they want" (*PH*: 75) Assumptions of this kind are constant in Adichie's stories. Many of her female characters in *TTAYN* show behaviours and thoughts that validate this idea of imposed marriage and submission as the only choices for them. In "Imitation", for example, Nkem, the protagonist, after dealing with a hard inner turmoil of negative feelings towards her situation and her husband's cuckoldry, decides to move to Nigeria with him and fight for her marriage: "'We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back.'" She speaks slowly, to convince him, to convince herself as well." (*TTAYN*: 41) The author draws an interesting parallelism in this story between the husbands' cuckoldry and the hypocrisy shown by British colonizers. The reflection is inserted in the middle of Nkem's thoughts about a

conversation she had with her husband and it clearly connects the colonial past with the present situation she is going through. The husband brought home an imitation of a traditional mask and complained about the British stealing the originals during assaults and also about "...how the British had a way of using words like "expedition" and "pacification" for killing and stealing" (*TTAYN*: 25). The way he mentions this does not differ from how he uses "business" as an alibi for leaving her in the US in order to carry on with his extramarital adventure in Nigeria.

Also, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", Chinaza goes back to her husband after reflecting on the meaning of, as the title predicts, her arranged marriage. She refuses any opportunity to start a new life free from a relationship she is not happy with and continues with her married life: "I went back across the hall the next evening. I rang the doorbell and he opened the door, stood aside and let me pass" (*TTAYN*: 186) Things are never crystal clear in Adichie's stories and so it could also be argued that Chinaza is not totally convinced to go back to the life she is living and comes back just to wait until her legal papers arrive, following her friend's counsel: "'You can wait until you get your papers and then leave" Nia said" (*TTAYN*: 186) However, arranged marriages are portrayed by the author as a source of sadness and melancholy in her fiction. Furthermore they are a reflection of the reality in contemporary Nigeria. This kind of marriages certainly lessens the woman's sexual freedom and maintains a sexist and patriarchal system, although their mechanics tend to be less aggressive now than they were in the past. As Falola states,

while there is evidence of arranged marriages, it is most common for the parties to court and agree to wed. Families are involved in the marriage, as bride wealth is



paid to the bride's family for purposes of social approval rather than wealth redistribution. (Falola, 1999 :6)

The lack of freedom for women to choose the life they want to live is particularly highlighted in the case of Kambili's mother. Her situation and the disempowerment she suffers from lead to an oppressive environment when she denies her own instinct of protecting her children and allows her husband to cruelly punish them and exert his authority through violence, displaying a very traditional conception of masculinity and fatherhood. Furthermore, there is an eloquent scene at the beginning of the novel when Eugene throws a missal book at his son but it ends up hitting an *étagère* with Kambili's mother's figurines and she has a completely silent reaction. We are told that she is very proud of her collection and cleans them every week but her response to the accident is rather passive and assuming. It is not the one expected from someone who feels free to be angry at the loss of valued personal goods but the one expected from a conditioned wife, afraid to start a husband's violent reaction: ““*Nne, ngwa. Go and change*”, Mama said to me, startling me although her Igbo words were low and calming. In the same breath, without pausing, she said to Papa, “Your tea is getting cold,” and to Jaja, “Come and help me, *biko*”” (PH: 8)

The importance of the husband in this analysis resides in the fact that he is the dominant partner in the family and the male source of power. He exerts an absolute control and tries to rule everyone in the house. This domination will be challenged at the end of the novel, marking a turning point in the rest of the family's life. This rebellion will be further explored when analyzing Kambili. Having studied in a Catholic school, Eugene, the father, is supposed to have suffered a very distinctive clash of

cultures and religions, like many Africans. The Western influence driven by missionaries probably made him reject his original culture, beliefs and traditions. For example, he has a broken relationship with his own father and demonizes him for his non-Christian beliefs. He refers to him in these terms when he decides to send Kambili and Jaja to his house to greet him: “I don’t like to send you to the home of a heathen, but God will protect you” (*PH*: 62) This rejection of his own African identity results in his showing two very opposed sides: the public one, that of the benefactor and political activist, a “Big Man” as he is called, and the private one, that of the abusive, unstable father and husband, using violence to assert his position of power inside the house. On the situation with his wife, Mabura writes: “Eugene has also fallen prey to a deeper underlying and irreconcilable battle between his sexuality and Catholicism” (Mabura: 218) This irreconcilability could be an outcome of his Christian education with the missionaries. The abuses committed by Eugene clearly include gender violence against his wife although it is not often explicitly stated in the novel, following the innocence in the eye of the first person narrator, Kambili. However, there are passages where it is easy for the reader to make the necessary connections and blame Eugene for the wounds on Kambili’s mother’s face, like the following one: “Mama was at the door when we drove into our compound. Her face was swollen and the area around her right eye was the black-purple of an overripe avocado. She was smiling.” (*PH*: 190) These lines define an abused woman unable to stand up and rebel against her husband. She assumes her subaltern role and smiles as if nothing happened. Towards the end, Mama appears in Ifeoma’s house and confesses in front of her daughter the abuse that has provoked the loss of her baby: “You know the small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne*? Your

father broke it on my belly.” (*PH*: 248) This confession anticipates a change in Mama’s attitude which will eventually lead to her killing her husband.

Considering Eugene as a symbolic figure, it would be fair to say that he is an example of the absolute power exerted by men in Nigerian society, both in political and domestic terms. Stobie insists on this symbolic use of the character:

Eugene is not merely an individual. References to the Big Man in politics [...] and in universities, make it clear that Adichie is using Eugene as a symptomatic case of the unchecked use of patriarchal power. (Stobie, 2010: 426)

As has been mentioned, the discourse of gender is a main feature in Adichie’s narratives. The gender problematic is embroidered with that of race and religion, among others, creating a fruitful soil to explore not only the reality of female subjugation and patriarchal power in Nigeria but also the lines of resistance that could enhance future generations of women, which are explored in the next section.

### **3. Female Resistance in a Postcolonial Environment**

#### **3.1. Empowered Individuals**

In Adichie’s narratives, there are a number of female symbols of rebellion against disempowerment. To begin with, throughout *PH*, Ifeoma’s empowerment and liberation has a great symbolic meaning both in terms of Kambili’s own process of growing up and also in order to give the novel a critical feminist reading. Not only her, but also her daughter Amaka are clear examples of the possibilities of female liberation. She is an

independent woman who lives alone with her children and works at the university in Nsukka. Ifeoma's lifestyle and the freedom that Kambili and her brother can enjoy at her house make the children rethink their own upbringing, sexually awakened and finally rebel against their father. Ifeoma is very conscious and unhappy with the situation of mistreatment and domestic violence happening at Kambili's house; she even tries to convince Mama to leave Eugene on many occasions, especially after he physically punishes the children: "“This cannot go on, *nwunye m*, Auntie Ifeoma said. “When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head.”” (PH: 213) Her words probably help Mama take her final decision and fight her husband back. Finally, Mama herself kills her own husband, breaking with the male authority that had oppressed her and her children since the beginning of the novel. This final act of rebellion and resistance has a variety of powerful meanings. First of all, it is remarkable how she chooses to poison his tea. Mama confesses it to her children at the end of the novel: ““I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor”” (PH: 290) Using tea as the way to poison him does not seem not to be a random choice since at the beginning of the novel tea is portrayed as a symbol of Papa's dangerous and hurting love:

A love sip, he called it, because you shared the little things you loved with the people you love. [...] The tea was always too hot, always burned my tongue. [...] But it didn't matter, because I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa's love into me. (PH: 8)

Also, the killing can be interpreted as an image of a mature Africa breaking the chains of colonial rule, liberating from the civil wars and the ethnic struggles that have

happened all through the continent since many countries gradually gained their independence, an image of hope. Not in vain is tea a colonial element, an imported cultural artifact. However, in the novel the consequences of this act are bad for the family though, since Jaja is jailed for the murder of his father, maybe connecting the situation with failed attempts of postcolonial independence such as the Biafran War in Nigeria, which took place after the Biafran independence from the rest of the country and led to a period of starvation of the population and finally the reunification of the territories.

In the short story “Imitation”, Nkem, before giving up and deciding to move back to Nigeria, maybe as the only possible way to fight against her husband’s cuckoldry, cuts her hair in a clear act of rebellion. Her motivation to do it also probably comes from a will to mimic two other women. On the one hand, “the Nigerian woman she met once [...] at a wedding in Delaware whose husband lived in Nigeria, too, and who had short hair although hers was natural...” (*TTAYN*: 28) to whom she feels close due to their similar situations. On the other, her husband’s new lover who she describes as “the girl with the short curly hair” (*TTAYN*: 41) Nevertheless it is important to highlight her likely intention of self-cleaning, of cutting the past together with the hair. This act leads to a conversation with her husband about her new hairstyle, when he makes a self-explanatory appreciation about it: ““Anything will look good with your lovely face, darling, but I liked your long hair better. You should grow it back, Long hair is more graceful on a Big Man’s wife”” (*TTAYN*: 40) Nkem, conscious of the importance of her long hair as a symbol of her husband’s wealth and position of power cuts it wanting to

cut also the link that restrains her as a mere trophy wife instead of a powerful individual.

### **3.2. Developers: (Hi)stories of Change**

Adichie's female characters cannot be categorized easily in one group or another regarding their degree of empowerment. Their behaviours and attitudes show a high level of fluidity and they undergo a series of changes throughout the narratives, reflecting reality. Examples like Kambili or her mother in *Purple Hibiscus* and Ujunwa in "Jumping Monkey Hill" prove this development which includes a liberating message for contemporary African women.

Kambili's process of growing up in the novel is marked by the changes in how she regards her father, her mother, their relationship and the domestic abuse happening at her house among others. At the beginning of the story she idealizes Eugene: "That night I fell asleep hugging close the image of Papa's face lit up, the sound of Papa's voice telling me how proud of me he was, how I had fulfilled God's purpose for me" (*PH*: 52-53) and does not question his decisions and acts: "Later, at dinner, Papa said we would recite sixteen different novenas. For Mama's forgiveness. [...] I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama need to be forgiven for." (*PH*: 35-36), apparently unconscious of the situation of abuse and control taking place at her house.

The strong opinions that Eugene holds against his own father are nevertheless different from what Kambili experiences in her own life. When she visits her grandfather she is unable to find the strangeness and the evil in him that her father

always mentions: “I had examined him that day, too, looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn’t see any, but I was sure they were somewhere. They had to be” (*PH*: 63) Tunca remarks this difference between Eugene’s discourse and Kambili’s lived experience: “...already in the early stages of the narrative, Kambili finds herself unable to bridge the chasm between the ideology her father has instilled into her and her own visual experiences.” (Tunca: 125)

And it is precisely the lived experience at her aunt’s house and the relationships Kambili establishes with other members of her family, like her cousins or her grandfather, what causes a change in her approach to her father. The differences are evident from the first description the narrator offers about the environment in the new house: “Laughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma’s house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly” (*PH*: 140) The contrast with Kambili’s house is strong. Ifeoma offers her and her brother an opportunity to be free and to explore themselves and the world in a more relaxed atmosphere, without the restraints of their father, who imposed a very different mood in his house:

Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep. He revised them often (*PH*: 23-24).

In Nsukka, Kambili is introduced to a new environment where her cousin is allowed to speak her mind, she listens to African music, and her granddad is welcomed

as family instead of being demonized. Following Hron's words: "Unlike her father who denies his roots, Kambili only grows and flourishes, like the purple hibiscus, when she learns to draw on her roots and cultivate her hybridity." (Hron: 34) The impact that all this has on Kambili is shown gradually through her attitudes and sometimes unconscious reactions. The appreciation of family life in her aunt's house leads her to crave for something unknown: "Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu spoke sometimes, their voices low, twining together. They understood each other, using the sparsest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have" (*PH*: 165) Kambili misses a caring fatherly figure and also a good relationship with her granddad which her father has avoided for years.

Later, back at her home and after having scalded her feet for punishment, Eugene finds Amaka's painting of their granddad in Kambili's bedroom and destroys it. That is the moment when rebellion takes place and Kambili lays on the pieces of the painting wanting to protect "something lost, something I have never had, would never have" (*PH*: 210) The picture was a symbol of her own freedom, of a different life. Kambili puts up with a heavy hitting as a consequence of her insolence and soon after that she and her brother go back to Nsukka. There, she learns about her mother's miscarriage due to Eugene's violence and when he comes to pick them up, she intends to greet him but something, almost unconsciously prevents her from doing it: "I had intended to hug him and have him kiss my forehead, but instead I stood there and stared at his face" (*PH*: 252). When she arrives at her home, she feels sick just from the smell of the garden: "The scent of fruits filled my nose when Adamu opened our compound gates. It was as if the high walls locked in the scent of the ripening cashews and mangoes and



avocados. It nauseated me.” (PH: 252-253) What makes her sick could not only be the smell of the fruit but also the whole situation she is living and moreover having to come back to her father. Furthermore, the ripening fruits remind of the control and abuse exerted by Eugene, which is coming to an end.

It is also remarkable how, even though Kambili has suffered the violence and punishments of her father and has also witnessed other possible ways of living at her aunt’s house, she never completely condemns Eugene’s behaviour. Tunca has also written about this peculiarity: “Kambili arguably learns to question her father’s principles, but she is never able to completely remove the aureole she has put around Eugene’s head.” (Tunca: 128). Even after her mother’s confession, Kambili’s reaction is ambiguous: “For a long, silent moment I could think of nothing. My mind was blank, I was blank. Then I thought of taking sips of Papa’s tea, love sips, the scalding liquid that burned his love onto my tongue. “Why did you put it in his tea?” I asked Mama, rising. My voice was low. I was almost screaming. “Why in his tea?”” (PH: 290) She, perhaps due to her young age and her mother’s discretion is not completely able to blame her father. Kambili’s process of growing up may have a second reading, an interpretation as a symbol of Nigeria’s own history and its dealing with Western influence and the colonial past. Hron wisely summarizes it:

As evidenced in the novel, Kambili’s journey to adulthood also reflects the struggles of young Nigeria, as it negotiates Western and traditional norms, while also being overwhelmed by economic disparity, bad governance, pervasive corruption, or human rights violations. (Hron: 31)

Kambili's mother is another example of a changing character. She copes with her husband's abuse and violence all throughout the book but silently poisons him, thus rebelling and rejecting the submissive role she had been granted for life.

In *The Thing Around Your Neck* there is a particular story, "Jumping Monkey Hill", which depicts an interesting character, Ujunwa, who shows mixed reactions towards male chauvinism. She takes part in a writing workshop with other African people and a few situations are described where she has to cope with unwanted teasing and sexist attitudes. Her own fiction, then redefined as true memories, describes a situation of male abuse: "...the man says he will hire her and then walks across and stands behinds her and reaches over her shoulders to squeeze her breasts" (*TTAYN*: 100) During the workshop, her writing and also the writing of other companions are rejected by Edward, the leader of the workshop for not being about the real Africa. He treats her with superiority, as it can be observed in the following fragment:

Then he looked at Ujunwa in the way one could look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. (*TTAYN*: 108)

As it turns out, his attitudes towards Ujunwa are sexist and superficial, although she tries to ignore them. The narrator says that "Ujunwa tried not to notice that Edward often stared at her body, that his eyes were never on her face but always lower" (*TTAYN*: 106) It is possible to come to the conclusion that behind the argument he gives the rest to reject some stories: "they are not talking of the real Africa", a rejection of

feminism is hidden, so he protects his own values and does not have to rethink his behaviour. When the last version of her story is reviewed and Edward describes it as “agenda writing”, Ujunwa explodes and rebels against the sexism pervading the workshop and the complicity of the rest, then leaves:

Inside Ujunwa, something shrunk. [...] He was watching her, and it was the victory in his eyes that made her stand up and start to laugh. The participants stared at her. She laughed and laughed and they watched her and then she picked up her papers. (TTAYN: 114)

After this outburst, and before leaving, she confesses that her story was very real since it was a memory of her own lived experience, breaking Edward’s arguments. Adichie implicitly addresses through this story a critique of the rejection of feminist writing and establishes gender problematic as a contemporary problem in *real* Africa.

#### **4. Conclusion: Towards Gender Equality in Africa**

After analyzing Adichie’s fiction, many powerful female voices are found in her stories. These women are taken from Nigerian reality and as such, they live in a strongly sexist and patriarchal society. Also, they enjoy different degrees of empowerment and freedom. Adichie’s characters are fluid in their attitudes towards their own subaltern situations; although they cope with abusive situations for a certain amount of time, they usually find a way to escape, like Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, or Ujunwa in “Jumping Monkey Hill” or else take action to get a better situation, like Nkem in “Imitation” or

Kambili's mother in *Purple Hibiscus*, probably the most radical one yet silent and without exerting physical violence.

The importance of these characters resides in the opportunities the author offers them to ameliorate their situations. Moreover, their voices are not silenced but strong and powerful. Nfah's reflection about this kind of fiction is very enlightening:

Female characters in these women's writing therefore are portrayed not in stereotypical subservient, unchanging roles, or in roles that are deliberately limiting. Instead, they come alive as speaking subjects and agents for change.

(Nfah-Abbenyi: 151)

Adichie's characters are not mere fiction but "agents of change", active examples that exhibit hope for many generations of contemporary African women that gain more power each day in their long quest for gender equality.

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