

Silence and solitude:  
the post-colonial  
situation of women in  
africa, according t...



Both *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* by Ifi Amadiume and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie discuss the situation of women in post-colonial Nigeria. Amadiume studies the woman's function in Nnobi, a village in Southeastern Nigeria, and compares how the position of wives and daughters in Nigerian society has shifted between pre-colonial to post-colonial times. Through *Purple Hibiscus*, we are shown a fictional case study of the woman's role in post-colonial Nigeria through two of the novel's main characters: Beatrice and Kambili. In comparing the two texts, self-expression seems to be the key to power, wealth, and status for women in pre-colonial Nigeria, and its absence subjugates wives and daughters in post-colonial Nigeria. While women continue to accept these ideologies, they will never be able to reclaim and rewrite the colonial gender ideologies that constrict them. Using evidence from both of the aforementioned texts, this paper seeks to prove that speech and agency have played a vital role in the post-colonial creation and dissemination of patriarchal power relations and gender ideologies, at the detriment of women in Nigeria.

In *Male Daughters and Female Husbands*, Amadiume presents the argument that dual-sex organizational principles do not necessitate rigid gender systems that completely separate male and female. The village of Nnobi, pre-colonial and post-colonial, serves as her case study. She argues that though gender ideologies existed and governed the economic and social scope of males and females, "a flexible gender system mediated the dual-sex organizational principle." (Amadiume 28) Thus, gender was not necessarily determined by biological sex; eldest daughters could assume the roles of eldest sons, accumulating wealth, inheriting property and marrying

multiple wives. As the 'male daughter', she became the head of her obi, or family line, and could own land and livestock. And, should she choose to marry, her role as a wife or mother in no way restricted her financial prospects. In fact, motherhood was very highly regarded, and households were exceedingly matrifocal, or centered around the mother and her influence over her children and her husband. Industrious women were admired, and women given the title of Ekwe were wealthy and charismatic. In terms of representation, visibility, and self-expression,

"The Agba Ekwe titled woman had the most central political position in all Nnobi - she held the vetoing in the village and general town assemblies... while the extent of [male leaders'] power could be challenged, the position of the Agba Ekwe titled woman was never disputed." (Amadiume 55)

The head of the Ekwe council, the Agba Ekwe, held uncontested and absolute power in the village; she could even call all-women strikes to withhold cooking and sexual favors from their husbands. In pre-colonial Nnobi, women had the power to grow their wealth, elevate their stations, and express their thoughts.

Then came the event that dismantled a gender system that allowed female power and expression. Since women could previously occupy male roles as male daughters and female husbands, they were given opportunities to acquire wealth, power, and status. But "under colonialism, these indigenous institutions... were abandoned or reinterpreted to the detriment of women." (Amadiume 123) The Ekwe title, once a social symbol of a woman's economic success, was banned by missionaries and colonialists. The

acquiring of wives by a female was misinterpreted as going against Christian canon and banned. The market, once a female domain, was overrun by males and females were all but pushed back into the home. As Amadiume asserts based on several interviews, women in Nnobi,

“...had lost their grip on the control of liquid cash; men had invaded the general market, and women were becoming helpless in their personal relations with husbands. But, most important of all, pro-female institutions were being eroded both by the church and the colonial administration.”

(Amadiume 132)

Women were now financially dependent on men, and defined by their husband's or father's social status and achievements rather than their own. As they lost their ability to express themselves in a public sphere, negative ideologies surrounding womanhood began to emerge: silence, subservience, and self-sacrifice.

No character in *Purple Hibiscus* embodies those three concepts better than Beatrice Achike. Beatrice barely speaks throughout the novel, and is entirely controlled and abused by her husband. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene is described as the product of colonialism by his sister, and it is a very fitting appellation; he eschews everything having to do with traditional Nigerian customs and wholeheartedly adopts the teachings of his colonizers. Since the pre-colonial practices of respecting wives as wholly capable individuals could be seen as a 'traditional Nigerian custom', his behavior towards Beatrice furthers Amadiume's claim that the rigid gender ideologies created during colonialism are the reason for females' inferior position in society.

Because of Eugene Achike's tyrannical violence, Beatrice and her children are often silent and talk in hushed tones. As Beatrice's daughter, Kambili, observes, " Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips." (Adichie 16). The tension that Eugene brings to their home is often tempered by Beatrice's calm presence, though she says nothing to stop the violence because she has been stripped of her voice. It is worth noting that while Kambili is also silent, she has been gifted the narrative voice as a daughter. As a wife, Beatrice has neither. She has no independent claim to wealth or status outside her home and no influence within her home either, since the Achike household is patrifocal. Beatrice's turning point comes on Palm Sunday, when Jaja refuses to receive the Communion and Papa throws a missal at Beatrice's beloved figurines, smashing them. She " stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with her bare hands." (Adichie 15) After this event, Beatrice does not suddenly begin expressing herself or seeking individual fulfilment; however, she starts speaking a little bit more about Eugene's abuses, starts poisoning his tea, and begins freeing herself from her situation.

After Eugene's death, Beatrice must start defining herself outside of her husband's shadow. Mama and Kambili assume control of their extended family and finances (just like the male daughters of pre-colonial Nigeria). Beatrice is open about the fact that she killed Eugene, learns how to hire and fire employees, and willingly neglects the proper mourning rituals for her husband's death. She is still silent, but she is not being silenced by fear of her husband; it is silence in freedom rather than silence in oppression.

Kambili describes a scene in which Beatrice thanks her, and Kambili reflects

that “ It is one of the few times in the past three years that she has spoken without first being spoken to” (Adichie 306). Beatrice is not fully in control of herself yet; Kambili must still guide her through plans and daily routines. Though the colonial gender ideology that had trapped her has been removed she apparently still suffers from its after-effects, especially when compared to the confident and self-possessed Aunty Ifeoma.

Analyzing *Male Daughters and Female Husbands* and *Purple Hibiscus* in tandem both reveals the impact that colonialism has had on wives and daughters in Nigeria and delivers a very grim prognosis: even if these colonial gender ideologies are lifted, the damage to a woman’s ability to express herself might be irreparable. In both texts, silence and a lack of agency have a direct correlation with powerlessness.

#### Works Cited:

- 1) Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus* . Harper Collins, 2017.
- 2) Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* . Zed Books, 2015.