

# QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN KAMBILI ACHIKE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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## Abstract

Adichie is one of the flourishing Nigerian authors who loves to share her experiences as being a black female in the male-dominated society and she is also very much proud of her nation and its culture. Bildungsroman is a genre which focuses on the moral and psychological growth of the main character from childhood to adulthood. The representation of women's experience is portrayed in the literary genre Female Bildungsroman. Adichie uses her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), to express the female experience and growth through her female protagonist Kambili Achike. This paper titled, "Quest for Identity in Kambili Achike in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" mainly focuses on the quest for self-identity in the protagonist, Kambili Achike by the employment of Female Bildungsroman.

**Keywords:** bildungsroman, growth, experience, self-identity.

You talk of freedom and the flood of mercy.  
If you should deny women their freedom  
Then there is not life at all on this earth.

-*Manumission of Woman*(45)

In literary criticism, a Bildungsroman is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age), in which the character's change is extremely important. The protagonist achieves the goal of maturity gradually with great difficulty. The genre mainly features on the major conflict between the protagonist or main character and society. Female Bildungsroman is a term to secure the representation of women's experience in writing a necessary means to fulfill the aim of finding a new female Bildung. The quest for genuine female self-development is the vital theme in contemporary women's fiction. The maturity starts from the adolescent protagonist to coming of age or as the mature woman awakening to the reality of social and cultural role as a woman.

*Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is the first novel of the famous Nigerian writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. To appraise the lives of her characters in the novel, Adichie uses her own childhood experiences. *Purple Hibiscus* is the coming of age story in which Adichie explains through her central character Kambili. The narrator Kambili expresses her struggle to attain her self-identity and it is portrayed throughout the novel. The novel, *Purple Hibiscus* takes place in a post-colonial city in Nigeria named Enugu. The protagonist, Kambili Achike's transformation from the age of fifteen to adulthood is the narrative of the novel.

Kambili is an intelligent, observant and a quite girl who never speaks to anyone even in her school. So, her classmates consider her as a snob. Her dominating father, Eugene Achike prepares a schedule for Kambili which makes her mute, although Kambili secures first in almost all her subjects. She is very much interested in her studies because Kambili believes that through education she will create an identity of her own.

Eugene Achike, father of Kambili is a prominent figure in Enugu who successfully runs several factories and publishes an English newspaper. He expects perfection from his family and is also a strict Catholic authoritarian. To correct the behavior of his family, he severely punishes his wife and children. He is estranged from his traditional African culture and his own father, Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili is motivated by fear and is impotent to create her own identity. So she hates her father.

While Kambili and Jaja, Kambili's brother visits their Auntie Ifeoma in Nsukka, Ifeoma brings her father Papa-Nnukwu to her house. Both Kambili and Jaja decide to hide it from Papa because Papa considers Papa-Nsukka as a 'Heathen'. When Papa knows that his children are sharing a home with a 'heathen', he

punishes them cruelly. Meanwhile, Kambili comes to know the beauty of her grandfather that he offers thanks to his god and proclaims his good needs. When Eugene finds that his children has spent time with Papa-Nnukwu, he takes them to their home and punishes them by pouring hot water over their feet for “walk into sin”(194).

Kambili compares her father and her Auntie Ifeoma, and then she admires Ifeoma because she encourages her children for the questioning authority, raising them with faith but also with intellectual capacity. But Papa does not give any chance to his children to think and do as they wish. Later, Kambili befriends Auntie Ifeoma’s elder daughter Amaka. Then, she meets a Nigerian-born Priest named Amadi. Father Amadi is a kind and supportive man to Kambili. By the introduction of Father Amadi, Kambili learns that it is possible for her to think about her own self. After that, she shares all things to Amaka and both become friends. Then Kambili observes herself and tries to learn her own ‘self’.

Kambili hates her father mainly for beating the whole family, particularly for the miscarriages for her mother. Another one is, Kambili is beaten severely and is admitted in hospital very critically. Because, when Kambili and Jaja feel comfort on seeing the painting of Papa-Nnukwu, found by Eugene, he beats his children mercilessly. After the recovery, Kambili goes to her Auntie Ifeoma’s home instead of her house from the hospital. Kambili starts breaking her shell to learn how to laugh and indulge herself in the Igbo songs. Her attention on Father Amadi intensifies and she encourages herself that “you can do anything you want, Kambili” (239). For the financial shortage, Auntie Ifeoma moves to America and Kambili feels alienated. She also worries for not being able to help her auntie and cousins. But her cousin Amaka does not want to move because she believes that her roots are in Nigeria. At this situation, Kambili feels isolated and is recovered by someone who is close to her. During adolescence stage most of the development occurs, Kambili too experiences the painful path in her life.

In this novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s quest for identity is different, because her mother killed her own husband and her brother Jaja takes the blame and goes to prison. Her mother maintains silence after Kambili’s father’s death. Kambili compares the present silence and the previous one when her father is alive. Both Kambili and Beatrice, Kambili’s mother are sad when Jaja is released from the prison after three years. Later Kambili happily informs her mother that she wants to go to Nsukka and America to meet her Auntie Ifeoma and her cousins. Then she wants go to Abba, where she will plant orange trees and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus. At this stage, Kambili’s hope of happiness is revealed and in Abba, she certainly wants to craft her own identity in her own place. She points that, “I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon” (307). The word “new rains” indicates Kambili’s hope for a new beginning. Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* is clearly seen as a genre of Female Bildungsroman through the central character Kambili Achike.

The novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, has been analyzed from a female bildungsroman perspective with a view to encourage men with negative attitudes towards women to change. Feminists in Africa are sometimes mistakenly regarded as radical and adopting western lifestyle which is alien to African culture. Here, in this novel *Purple Hibiscus*, the protagonist Kambili Achike suffers a lot in her father’s hand. After visiting her Auntie Ifeoma’s house, she realizes that she too has some likes and dislikes and she also wants to lead life of her own. The novel begins with silence and also ends in silence. But the silence from the beginning is different from the silence at the end of the novel. The ending silence is a transformation of Kambili with new hope. On the whole the last shade of silence that confuses their sense of imagination could be said to be shady, because it is a silence characterized by hope and dreams. (Meher, 209)

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