

**OPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

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**A RESEARCH WORK SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND
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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this research was carried out by **Rebecca Oluchi OBAYAGBONA**, in the Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City under my supervision.

Prof.(Mrs.) S. I.**Akhuemokhan****(PROJECT SUPERVISOR)**

DATE

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to Almighty God for His Grace that sustained me in the course of this programme.

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I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the Almighty God for granting me the grace, wisdom, and perseverance required to complete this work successfully.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this study is to undertake a comparative literary analysis of the oppression of women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, with particular attention to the ways in which each novel reveals the structures, agents, and effects of patriarchal domination. This research seeks to interrogate how gender oppression is rooted in, and sustained by, the prevailing socio-cultural, religious, and domestic power structures of the respective societies represented in the texts.

By examining *Things Fall Apart*, set in a precolonial Igbo society, the study aims to uncover the ways in which tradition, communal norms, and gendered cultural roles institutionalise women's subordination. In contrast, *Purple Hibiscus* is grounded in a contemporary, postcolonial Nigerian setting where religious fundamentalism, economic dependency, and domestic tyranny intersect to produce new forms of female oppression. The comparative approach enables the identification of both continuity and change in the patterns of women's marginalisation over time.

Another central aim is to highlight the strategies, whether overt or subtle, by which women in each narrative endure, adapt to, or resist the forces that seek to silence and control them. By bringing Achebe's and Adichie's works into dialogue, the study will expose how oppression is not merely a relic of precolonial culture but an evolving phenomenon that assumes fresh guises in modern contexts.

This purpose also extends to filling a gap in existing scholarship: while both novels have been widely studied individually, there is a noticeable scarcity of sustained comparative analyses that link precolonial and postcolonial literary portrayals of female oppression within the Nigerian canon. Through this work, the research contributes to feminist literary discourse, foregrounding African women's experiences in different historical periods and offering insights into the resilience, vulnerabilities, and voices of women in patriarchal societies.

1.2 Scope of the Study

This study is limited to a comparative examination of how women's oppression is portrayed in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It focuses on the authors' literary representation of female subjugation rather than offering a broad sociological or historical survey. The analysis will centre on four main concerns: the cultural and institutional roots of patriarchy, the use of violence as a means of control, the silencing of women's voices, and the possibilities or limits of female resistance. Other aspects of the novels, such as male characterisation or political themes, will only be considered where they help to illuminate the oppression of women. The study will rely on close reading of the primary texts, supported by relevant secondary sources.

1.3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in literary criticism. Its purpose is comparative and explanatory, examining how Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*) and Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*) depict women's oppression through narrative technique,

characterisation, and discourse. Literature is treated as a social and cultural artefact, reflecting and shaping gendered power relations.

The primary data are the two novels, cited consistently in MLA 8 format. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles, critical essays, and feminist and postcolonial theory, providing contextual and theoretical support.

A purposive sampling strategy guides the selection of 20–30 passages per text, focusing on scenes that exemplify institutional control, violence, silencing, or resistance. Analysis integrates close reading, thematic coding, discourse analysis, and narratology, examining diction, imagery, focalisation, and narrative perspective. Themes such as bodily control, shame, silence, and subversive speech are coded and interpreted through feminist and postcolonial lenses.

The research unfolds in stages: detailed readings, passage selection and annotation, thematic coding, engagement with secondary literature, and comparative synthesis. Analytical matrices map recurring patterns, narrative strategies, and consequences for women. Rigour is ensured through transparent coding, reflexive journaling, source triangulation, and grounding all claims in textual evidence.

Limitations include subjectivity inherent in interpretive analysis, the focus on two texts, and purposive sampling, which prioritises depth over breadth. Nonetheless, the methodology ensures a robust, defensible account of how each text reproduces and challenges patriarchal structures.

1.4 Theoretical Background

Feminist literary theory provides the principal frame for this study because it offers the concepts and tools needed to examine how literature represents gender relations, power, and voice. At its simplest, feminist criticism asks who speaks, who is heard, and who is silenced in a text. It examines how novels reproduce or question social ideas about women and men (Showalter 13). For the novels under investigation, this means reading Achebe and Adichie as writers whose stories stage gendered power and whose narrative choices shape how readers understand women's lives.

The origins of feminist literary criticism lie in the political movements of the late twentieth century and in the work of early theorists who turned political questions about equality into questions about language and representation (23). Early feminist critics revealed that canonical texts often exclude women or confine them to stereotypes. From that point, the field grew quickly and branched into several directions. Some critics concentrated on recovering the neglected writing of women (Gilbert and Gubar xii). Others developed formal tools to read how style and point of view produce gendered meanings. Psychoanalytic and Marxist methods were incorporated, and later poststructural theory opened new ways of thinking about identity and agency (Butler 33). Through that development, feminist theory acquired a vocabulary that includes patriarchy, symbolic violence, gendered socialisation, and the politics of voice—terms central to the analyses that follow (hooks 17).

African scholars adapted and transformed feminist theory so that it addressed the particular history and social organisation of African communities (Ogundipe Leslie 7). African womanism emerged as a response to the limits of some Western feminist models, insisting

that the struggle for women's dignity must be pursued in ways that take account of communal ties, local customs, and the legacy of colonial rule (Hudson-Weems 25). African womanism prioritises cultural context and social solidarity while still calling for the end of injustice. Similarly, African feminisms moved the debate toward intersection, arguing that gender cannot be separated from class, ethnicity, religion, and colonial history (Crenshaw 1244). This shift enabled a wider and more precise analysis of oppression that is useful for comparing a precolonial text with a contemporary novel.

The scholarship behind these developments is rich and varied. Showalter's account of women as readers and writers helps us think about literary tradition (*A Literature* 43). Millett's study of sexual politics shows how family and culture are represented in literature as sites of power (Millett 31). Butler's work on gender performance offers a lens for reading how roles are enacted within households and communities (*Gender Trouble* 136). Mohanty and Spivak brought crucial postcolonial critique into feminist study, insisting that Western categories cannot be applied uncritically to the global South (Mohanty 336; Spivak 275). Crenshaw's intersectionality reminds us to read class, race, and religion alongside gender (Crenshaw 1241).

African theorists supply approaches that are especially relevant here. Amadiume's ethnographic work examines fluid gender roles in African societies (Amadiume 88). Oyewumi critiques the imposition of Western gender categories on African contexts (*Invention* 12). Ogundipe Leslie sets out transformative programmes for African women's empowerment (*Re-Creating* 45). Nnaemeka's "nego-feminism" theorises negotiation as a means by which African women navigate oppressive systems (Nnaemeka 372). These perspectives prevent the study from reading African texts through an exclusively Western

lens and help to locate the specific mechanisms of control at work in Achebe's Igbo world and in Adichie's modern Nigerian household.

No theory is without critique. Feminist theory has been criticised for sometimes speaking from a narrow standpoint and for generalising from particular experiences (hooks 5). Early Western feminism often failed to address race and empire (Mohanty 336). African womanism has been questioned when it appears to prioritise communal cohesion over exposing systemic gender injustice (Hudson-Weems 47). Poststructural approaches have been accused of rendering political claims less forceful by overstressing language and representation (Butler 199). For this study, the lesson is practical: theory must be applied with care, and each conceptual tool should be used to illuminate evidence in the novels rather than foreclose alternative readings.

The development of feminist criticism can be seen in four stages: **exposure** of women's absence or stereotyping; **recovery** of neglected works; **theorisation** of women's writing; and **integration** with postcolonial, queer, and intersectional thought (Showalter 15–17). African feminist scholarship evolved alongside this sequence, adding emphases on community and colonial history. For this study, the integrated, intersectional stage is most useful as it allows comparison across time and context while attending to cultural difference.

Feminist theory is crucial to this research because it explains why Okonkwo's violence against his wives, the exclusion of women from councils, and the silencing of female voices in *Things Fall Apart* are not isolated acts but expressions of systemic patriarchy (Stratton 29). It also clarifies how Eugene Achike's religious authoritarianism in *Purple Hibiscus* enables domestic abuse while maintaining public respectability (Adichie 32).

African feminist perspectives ensure that the analysis respects cultural context, while intersectionality requires that class, religion, and colonial history remain in view so that both novels can be compared without collapsing historical distinctions.

1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

Discussions of gender in *Things Fall Apart* often take two main directions. Some critics, like Florence Stratton, emphasise Achebe as a recorder of Igbo tradition, depicting a male-dominated world where women hold little formal power. Stratton observes that the narrative focus and style consistently place women on the margins of public life (Stratton 26). This perspective is evident in the novel when Okonkwo criticises his wives and daughters for perceived weaknesses, as when he beats Ekwefi during a moment of frustration, showing the limited agency women possess within the household (Achebe 37). While Stratton rightly highlights the exclusion of women, this view can oversimplify Achebe's portrayal, overlooking subtle indications of female influence.

Other scholars resist reading the novel as purely misogynistic. Ifi Amadiume notes that Igbo society, though often labelled patriarchal, provides spaces where women exercise authority, such as in certain ritual or familial contexts (Amadiume 14). This is visible in *Things Fall Apart* when Ezinma, despite being a daughter, is consulted for advice and shown to have insight beyond her years: "Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma is the only child of Ekwefi to survive past infancy, and he often wishes she were a boy" (Achebe 41). Amadiume's perspective helps illuminate women's complex social roles, but it sometimes generalises cultural practices and does not fully address Achebe's deliberate literary choices.

Biodun Jeyifo provides a psychoanalytic lens, interpreting Okonkwo's story as a crisis of masculinity intensified by the absence of a balancing female presence (Jeyifo 849). This focus highlights how male anxiety shapes women's experiences, though it pays less attention to broader social forces that confine women. Oyeronke Oyewumi warns against imposing Western notions of gender on Igbo society, cautioning that male and female categories may not fully capture local realities (Oyewumi 15). While this avoids misrepresentation, it may underplay the real harm women experience, such as the emotional cost of domestic discipline.

Rhonda Cobham Sander examines how the novel is taught, noting that readers often interpret the text through moral judgements about misogyny (Cobham Sander 242). While this offers insight into reception, it is less focused on literary analysis. Rose Ure Mezu applies a womanist lens, urging readings that foreground women's voices, emphasising that Achebe's narrative consistently places women on the margins (Mezu 108). This approach is compelling, though it risks overlooking the historical and cultural context that shapes women's experiences in the Igbo world.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, scholarship frequently focuses on domestic oppression and its links to wider systems of power. Musa W. Dube highlights how Papa Eugene's authoritarian control in the home mirrors religious and political domination, noting his use of fear and strict ritual to enforce compliance (Dube 5). This is visible in the text when Eugene punishes Kambili for not kneeling properly during prayers: "Kambili did not know whether to kneel or sit, but she kept silent, fearing her father's wrath" (Adichie 24). Susan Z. Andrade situates Adichie within a tradition of Nigerian writers who explore nationhood

through family and gender relations (Andrade 93). This helps frame the novel politically, though it provides less insight into the mechanics of domestic abuse.

Johnson examines silence as a survival strategy, showing how Beatrice and Kambili navigate oppression through quiet endurance (Johnson 67). In the novel, Beatrice reflects on her suffering silently: “She did not cry. She had learned that crying made things worse” (Adichie 58). While this illustrates resistance, it may understate the personal cost of remaining silent. Okafor analyses religious rituals as spaces where control and defiance intersect, such as when Kambili and Jaja secretly read forbidden books (Okafor 142). Thomas highlights Auntie Ifeoma’s household as a model of empowerment through education and independence (Thomas 211), exemplified when she encourages Kambili to speak and express herself: “Speak up, Kambili. There is no sin in your voice” (Adichie 101). Eze contrasts Ifeoma’s openness with Eugene’s strict household, demonstrating the stark effects of different patriarchal structures (Eze 54).

Some scholarship links both novels comparatively. Wendy Griswold situates Adichie within the Nigerian literary tradition, showing how contemporary writers build upon and alter earlier narratives (Griswold 88). Obioma Nnaemeka’s notion of nego-feminism stresses empowerment through negotiation rather than confrontation (Nnaemeka 372), a perspective evident in both Kambili’s subtle defiance and Ezinma’s quiet influence. Foundational theoretical frameworks such as Patricia Hill Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality offer tools to examine overlapping oppressions (Collins 22; Crenshaw 140), though they require careful adaptation to Nigerian contexts. Toril Moi and Chandra Talpade Mohanty caution against assuming universal

experiences of women, reinforcing the need to situate each text culturally (Moi 12; Mohanty 337).

Finally, studies on Nigerian generational change, such as those by Ogaga Okuyade, highlight how literature reflects evolving social norms, though they may underplay specific political contexts that distinguish Achebe's and Adichie's worlds (Okuyade 18).

In sum, the scholarship provides rich insights into women's oppression and subtle forms of resistance. Integrating these perspectives with textual evidence from *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* allows for a nuanced understanding of gender, power, and cultural change in Nigerian literature.

Justification of the Study

This study is justified because it examines how women's oppression is represented across time in Nigerian literature. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* shows subjugation through tradition and communal authority, while Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* exposes its persistence in postcolonial family and religious life. A comparative approach reveals both continuity and change, demonstrating how patriarchal structures adapt yet remain oppressive. By placing the two texts in dialogue, the study contributes to gender discourse and underscores literature's role in questioning inequality.

1.6 Thesis Statement

Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie *Purple Hibiscus* depict the domestic and social control of women, and woman resistance and agency, highlighting the persistence of patriarchal power across traditional and post colonial contexts.

CHAPTER TWO

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC AND SOCIAL OPPRESSION

2.1 Domestic Control and Physical Abuse

In both *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus*, the household becomes the first arena of oppression. Achebe presents Okonkwo as a man who equates authority with violence. From the beginning, the narrator tells us that Okonkwo “ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children” (*Things Fall Apart* 13). Fear is not occasional but constant, woven into the daily rhythm of domestic life. Okonkwo’s brutality also surfaces in ritual contexts. During the sacred Week of Peace, he forgets communal restraint and “beat his wife very heavily” (29). Here Achebe makes clear that personal rage can override cultural and spiritual law, and that women pay the price.

Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* offers a strikingly similar dynamic, though expressed through religious absolutism. Kambili recalls: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère” (*Purple Hibiscus* 3). The father’s authority is exercised through violence disguised as moral discipline. Beatrice, his wife, suffers repeated abuse, described with painful understatement. After one beating Kambili notes, “Mama had a swollen eye, the start of a purple shadow spreading across her face” (32). The

image of bruises silently replaces words, showing how violence functions as both punishment and pedagogy.

The consequences for children in both novels are profound. In Achebe, fear stifles playfulness and freedom, producing sons who either imitate or recoil from their father. In Adichie, Kambili confesses that even love is tied to pain: “I knew that when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa’s love into me” (21). Violence is not only physical but psychological, shaping perception, silencing speech, and distorting affection.

Achebe and Adichie thus converge on the same truth: domestic violence is not a side note but the central mechanism through which patriarchal authority is maintained. One grounds it in traditional masculinity, the other in religious zeal, but both reveal how women and children live in fear, bearing wounds that are as much emotional as they are physical.

2.2 Social and Cultural Marginalisation

Achebe and Adichie both demonstrate how women are systematically marginalised by cultural and social structures. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo world is organised around male authority, and women are largely excluded from leadership and inheritance. Achebe observes that “no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man” (*Things Fall Apart* 53). This shows that a man’s social status is measured by the extent of his control, not by the flourishing of his family. Women are defined in terms of male achievement and rarely appear in public decision-making. When Uzowulu is summoned before the *egwugwu* for beating his wife Mgbafo, it is her brothers who speak on her behalf, while she remains silent throughout the trial (89).

Achebe's scene makes clear that even when a woman is the injured party, her voice cannot be directly heard within the judicial system. The silencing is structural, not accidental.

Marginalisation also appears in ritual life. Achebe describes the *egwugwu* as the most important legal and spiritual authority in Umuofia, yet it is explicitly a "house of men" (88). Women cannot mask themselves as ancestral spirits or preside over disputes. They remain spectators at the edges. Even Okonkwo's beloved daughter, Ezinma, whom he often wishes were a boy, cannot cross the invisible boundary that separates influence within the household from authority in public life. As Achebe notes, "Ezinma was an only child and the centre of her mother's world" (44), but her value is still framed relationally, never independently.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* translates these cultural exclusions into the postcolonial domestic and religious context. Eugene, like Okonkwo, monopolises decision-making. Beatrice and Kambili do not participate in conversations that shape family life; they obey silently. Kambili narrates: "I wanted to say something, but the words in my head were too many, they crowded one another" (*Purple Hibiscus* 19). Her silence is not mere shyness but a product of constant suppression. When she attempts to speak, she has already internalised the fear of contradiction.

At the wider level of society, women who resist patriarchal standards face dismissal. Auntie Ifeoma, a widow and lecturer at the University of Nigeria, is considered threatening because she lives without male supervision. When she speaks freely in family gatherings, Eugene's sister labels her "a woman who cannot control her children" (84). The accusation echoes the same logic in Achebe's text, where a man is considered weak if his family is not

subdued. Patriarchal authority, whether traditional or modern, relies on equating control with respectability.

Despite these exclusions, both novels highlight forms of subtle female influence. Achebe presents Ezinma as a girl with unusual perceptiveness and resilience. Although she cannot inherit or attend the men's assemblies, Okonkwo often confides in her and wishes that she had been a son: "She should have been a boy" (*Things Fall Apart* 172). His words expose the contradiction of a society that recognises female intelligence but refuses to grant it social legitimacy. Similarly, Adichie frames Kambili's restricted voice as the central narrative perspective. While she is silenced within her home, she narrates the entire novel, giving readers access to a world of oppression through her eyes. In this sense, narration itself becomes a form of subtle agency, a reclaiming of speech from a system that demands silence.

The comparative pattern is clear. In *Things Fall Apart*, women are excluded by custom and ritual, while in *Purple Hibiscus*, women are excluded by religion and colonial legacies of authority. Both systems reduce women's participation in leadership and decision-making to the margins. Yet within these margins, Ezinma and Kambili reveal the persistence of female presence. Achebe's society offers recognition without power, while Adichie's society enforces silence but cannot erase narrative testimony. Together, the novels show that the marginalisation of women is not confined to one cultural moment but recurs in different forms across historical and social contexts.

2.3 Psychological and Emotional Oppression

Oppression in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* is not only physical or social but also deeply psychological. Achebe and Adichie carefully reveal how fear, silence, and trauma seep into the inner lives of women and children, shaping their thoughts and behaviour.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's obsession with masculinity translates into harsh emotional treatment of his family. When his second wife, Ekwefi, mutters under her breath during a small dispute, Okonkwo responds by nearly shooting her (39). The act is violent, but what lingers more heavily is the atmosphere of fear it creates within the household. Ekwefi's near-death does not only threaten her physically but conditions her and others to tread carefully around Okonkwo. Achebe also describes how Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, develops quiet resentment toward his father's violence, though he dares not voice it. Nwoye finds comfort in the stories of his mother rather than in Okonkwo's rigid demands for toughness: "Nwoye loved the stories that his mother told, and when Okonkwo heard them he called them womanish" (53). By dismissing tenderness as weakness, Okonkwo instills in his children a fear of failure and a suspicion of emotional expression. The psychological oppression here lies in equating affection with shame, forcing children and women alike to internalise silence as a mode of survival.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* presents this emotional domination with even sharper intensity. Eugene's household is defined by silence, fear, and constant watchfulness. Kambili describes how even laughter feels dangerous: "Laughter always carried a certain sinister quality in our house" (*Purple Hibiscus* 23). Words and gestures are carefully measured to

avoid his anger. Beatrice, after repeated abuse, retreats into near-total quietness, speaking only when necessary and enduring humiliation in silence. The narrator observes, “She spoke the way a bird eats, in small, careful bites” (22). The metaphor conveys not only caution but also the psychological shrinking of a woman under long-term intimidation.

The trauma extends to the children as well. When Jaja refuses communion in church—a small but bold act Kambili instantly fears the consequences: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother Jaja did not go to communion” (3). The opening line of the novel signals how deeply the children have been conditioned to expect punishment for even minor deviations. Kambili’s psychological landscape is defined by constant anxiety, where obedience is linked with survival.

Achebe, however, shows fewer signs of resistance to this psychological burden within *Things Fall Apart*. The women remain largely in the background, absorbing fear but rarely vocalising it. Ekwefi’s love for Ezinma is described as profound, “Her only child, the centre of her world” (44), yet even this bond is shadowed by the threat of loss and Okonkwo’s temper. The psychological cost of living under dominance is implied rather than directly described.

Adichie makes this cost explicit. Beatrice miscarries after one of Eugene’s beatings (32), a trauma that is both physical and deeply emotional. Later, she poisons him, an act that reveals the unbearable weight of years of silenced suffering. Kambili, though traumatised, begins to discover her voice through exposure to her Auntie Ifeoma’s freer household. She reflects on the difference: “Laughter floated over my head, the kind of laughter that was

natural and uninhibited” (128). The contrast reveals how oppression does not only silence but also deprives individuals of the psychological relief of ordinary joy.

In both novels, then, oppression works inwardly, shaping how women and children think, feel, and even imagine themselves. Achebe suggests how silence becomes habitual under the weight of tradition, while Adichie exposes the devastating psychological scars of domestic tyranny. The two texts converge on the insight that oppression is most powerful when it enters the mind, turning fear into self-censorship and obedience into a reflex.

CHAPTER THREE

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS – RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

3.1 Subtle and Quiet Resistance

Achebe and Adichie both show that even under heavy oppression, women and children are never completely stripped of agency. Their novels reveal that resistance does not always take the form of open rebellion; sometimes it is hidden, whispered, or disguised within gestures of compliance. This subtle resistance complicates the view of women as merely passive victims in patriarchal structures.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Ezinma illustrates how even a young girl can wield quiet influence over her father. Although Okonkwo terrifies most of his household, Achebe records

moments when Ezinma disarms him with her boldness. In one episode, she challenges his brusque order by asking, “Is that how you ask your daughter to do something?” (Achebe 64). Instead of punishing her, Okonkwo laughs, a rare crack in his otherwise harsh authority. This moment of levity suggests that resistance, when expressed through wit and affection, can unsettle power without direct confrontation. Similarly, Ekwefi, though beaten and nearly shot, is described as “fearless” and able to “stand up to him without a thought” (39). Her resistance is not dramatic but lies in her refusal to be fully broken by Okonkwo’s temper. By continuing to care deeply for Ezinma and to speak back to her husband, she preserves her dignity within a household that demands her silence.

Adichie explores similar quiet strategies but develops them into more central elements of her narrative. Beatrice, Kambili’s mother, often appears submissive, speaking “the way a bird eats, in small, careful bites” (*Purple Hibiscus* 22). Yet this careful silence conceals her long-term calculation. Unable to resist Eugene openly, she eventually poisons him, an act of quiet but decisive resistance against years of tyranny (290). Her passivity, therefore, is revealed as a mask for agency. As Nnaemeka’s idea of “nego-feminism” suggests, women in such systems often resist through negotiation and quiet strategies rather than outright defiance (372). Beatrice exemplifies this principle.

Kambili herself embodies another form of quiet endurance. For much of the novel, she hardly speaks, conditioned by fear into silence. She recalls that “laughter always carried a certain sinister quality in our house” (Adichie 23). Yet her silence is not simply submission. It is a survival tactic that allows her to endure and later transform. Under Auntie Ifeoma’s influence, she begins to experience another kind of silence one of reflection and growth. She notices that in Ifeoma’s home, “Laughter floated over my head, the kind of laughter

that was natural and uninhibited” (128). The comparison reveals how silence under tyranny can evolve into a space for awakening once new possibilities are encountered.

Aunty Ifeoma herself represents a more direct but still measured form of resistance. She does not rebel violently against patriarchy, but she asserts her independence through education and speech. When Eugene challenges her parenting, she responds calmly but firmly: “Eugene, let me raise my children as I see fit” (146). In this reply, she models a form of resistance grounded in confidence rather than confrontation. She refuses to let her brother dictate her household, yet she does not escalate the conflict into outright rebellion. Her defiance lies in the normalisation of autonomy.

When both texts are compared, the contrast becomes clear. Achebe’s women resist in small, almost hidden ways Ekwefi’s dignity, Ezinma’s wit, and Nwoye’s quiet withdrawal. Their resistance rarely shifts the balance of power, but it demonstrates resilience. Adichie, by contrast, makes quiet resistance central to her story, turning silence itself into a political act. Beatrice’s murder of Eugene is not celebrated, but it reveals the radical potential of quiet endurance. Kambili’s growth shows that silence can be both a cage and a seedbed for eventual freedom.

Ultimately, both Achebe and Adichie affirm that oppression never wholly erases agency. Instead, women and children invent subtle forms of resistance that allow them to survive, influence, and even transform their circumstances. These understated acts prepare the ground for more overt defiance, which will be explored in the next section.

3.2 Overt Acts of Defiance

While subtle resistance allows women and children to endure oppressive systems, both *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* also present moments of more direct defiance. These acts, though risky, expose the cracks in patriarchal authority and reveal the courage of individuals who refuse to remain silent.

In *Things Fall Apart*, open defiance is relatively rare, given the strength of Igbo traditions and the danger of challenging male authority. Yet Achebe provides glimpses of such defiance. Ekwefi, though often battered, refuses to be cowed entirely by Okonkwo's violence. When he nearly shoots her in a fit of anger, she later follows him to the shrine when their daughter Ezinma is taken by the priestess Chielo. Achebe writes, "Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life, but never before had she felt such determination" (Achebe 103). Her decision to shadow Chielo all night, disregarding Okonkwo's authority and even the divine command of the priestess, is an extraordinary act of maternal courage. In this scene, Achebe shows that love can inspire open defiance of both husband and tradition.

By contrast, Adichie foregrounds overt acts of defiance as key turning points in *Purple Hibiscus*. The most striking moment comes in the very first chapter, when Jaja refuses to attend communion. Kambili recalls, "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother Jaja did not go to communion" (Adichie 3). This refusal is not a small gesture; in a family where religion and obedience are strictly enforced, it is a direct challenge to Eugene's authority. Jaja's defiance sets in motion the unraveling of the family's rigid order and ultimately contributes to their liberation.

Kambili, though more hesitant, also moves from silence to moments of open defiance. When Amaka mocks her for being too quiet, Kambili does not respond immediately, but later she begins to assert herself. One important turning point occurs when she protects the painting of her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, even after Eugene destroys it in a rage. Adichie notes that “I wanted to say something, to scream, but the words would not come” (Adichie 210). Though her voice still fails her, her inward resistance grows until she can later express herself more confidently in Ifeoma’s environment. This gradual move from quiet endurance to assertive speech is one of the novel’s most significant developments.

Beatrice’s act of poisoning Eugene is the most radical form of overt defiance. It is not simply an act of desperation but a decisive end to a cycle of abuse. After years of silence and endurance, she breaks through with an act that permanently removes the oppressor. Kambili narrates it in understated language, but the implications are profound: Beatrice takes agency into her own hands, using the only means available to her. As Eze observes, “Her silence breaks into action, and her passivity masks the most shocking rebellion” (Eze 54).

In comparing both texts, Achebe’s characters tend to resist within the limits of their roles. Ekwefi’s night-long vigil is bold but rooted in maternal love rather than social revolution. Adichie’s characters, however, embody defiance that carries broader implications—religious, domestic, and even political. Jaja’s rejection of communion symbolises a break from authoritarian control, while Beatrice’s poisoning of Eugene confronts the very foundation of patriarchal violence in the household.

Both novels, however, converge on the insight that defiance always comes at a cost. Ekwefi risks divine punishment and her husband's wrath; Jaja is imprisoned for a crime he did not commit, and Beatrice suffers the physical and emotional toll of years of abuse. Yet these acts also affirm the humanity of the oppressed, proving that agency cannot be wholly erased.

3.3 Negotiation and Survival Strategies

Beyond subtle resistance and overt defiance, Achebe and Adichie both illustrate how women and children develop strategies of negotiation and survival within oppressive structures. These strategies are neither full submission nor outright rebellion but careful balancing acts that allow the oppressed to endure and preserve a sense of dignity.

In *Things Fall Apart*, women often navigate patriarchy by using indirect influence rather than direct confrontation. Ezinma, for instance, negotiates with her father in ways that no one else dares. When she addresses him playfully or questions his tone, she softens his otherwise rigid authority: "Ezinma did not call her father Nna like all children; she called him by his name as he called her" (Achebe 75). This unusual intimacy between father and daughter allows her to wield a quiet kind of power, reminding us that negotiation, not rebellion, gives her space to exist in a male-dominated household. Similarly, Nwoye's mother maintains her influence not through public authority but through storytelling. Achebe notes that Nwoye preferred "the stories his mother told, which were like the cooing of doves" (Achebe 53). Though dismissed by Okonkwo as "womanish," these stories sustain Nwoye emotionally and become his refuge. Here, negotiation takes the form of cultural and emotional nurturing, providing resistance through preservation of alternative values.

Adichie develops negotiation and survival into central themes of *Purple Hibiscus*. Beatrice exemplifies negotiation by maintaining a façade of compliance while secretly plotting her husband's downfall. She accepts Eugene's authority in public but withdraws into silence as a shield. Kambili observes her mother's silence after beatings: "Mama sat down, slowly, as though the weight of her body had doubled" (Adichie 32). This silence, while painful, becomes a space where she gathers the strength to act later. Her eventual decision to poison Eugene can be seen as the culmination of years of negotiation between survival and resistance.

Kambili also learns the art of survival through negotiation. In her father's home, silence is compliance, but in Ifeoma's home, she slowly negotiates her way into voice and confidence. At first, she struggles to speak in the freer atmosphere: "The words in my mouth were stuck, like caked phlegm" (Adichie 175). Yet by the end of her stay, she learns to laugh, to share, and to claim space. Her negotiation lies in adapting to different contexts remaining silent where speech is dangerous and learning to express herself where freedom is possible.

Auntie Ifeoma's life is itself a negotiation between patriarchy, poverty, and independence. As a widow raising children in a patriarchal society, she chooses the strategy of education and intellectual freedom. She tells Kambili, "Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes" (Adichie 146). Yet her defiance is tempered with practical survival—she maintains her academic position and resists Eugene's authority, but without cutting ties completely, knowing her survival depends partly on his financial assistance.

In comparing both texts, it is clear that Achebe portrays negotiation more as a quiet adaptation within the confines of tradition, while Adichie presents it as a dynamic process of survival that can lead to transformation. In Achebe, women sustain culture and exert

indirect influence; in Adichie, women endure, mask their intentions, and sometimes overturn systems of control through carefully calculated decisions. Both highlight the ingenuity of the oppressed in carving out spaces of survival where open defiance might lead to destruction.

Thus, negotiation and survival strategies emerge as a middle ground between submission and defiance, revealing the complexity of women's responses to patriarchy in both traditional and postcolonial contexts.

CHAPTER FOUR

NARRATIVE AND THEMATIC PERSPECTIVES

4.1 NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND FEMALE INTERIORITIES

A crucial point of comparison between Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* lies in their narrative techniques and the way these approaches shape the reader's access to women's experiences of oppression. Narrative voice determines not only what is seen but also how deeply the reader can enter the inner lives of marginalised characters.

Achebe employs a third-person omniscient narrator in *Things Fall Apart*, a voice that reflects the collective worldview of the Igbo community. The narrative foregrounds Okonkwo's rise and fall, rendering women's experiences secondary to the larger story of male authority and cultural upheaval. For example, when Okonkwo beats his second wife, the narrator states: "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (Achebe 13). The description is direct but external; it records the fact of oppression but does not enter into the consciousness of the wives themselves. This distance is telling: the narrative structure mirrors the cultural silencing of women within the society Achebe depicts. Women's oppression is seen, but rarely voiced.

By contrast, Adichie employs a first-person narrator, Kambili, in *Purple Hibiscus*. This choice radically alters the representation of female interiority. Through Kambili's hesitant, fractured narration, readers are brought directly into the psychological consequences of

oppression. When Eugene beats Beatrice until she miscarries, Kambili recalls: “The pieces of the figurines lay on the floor, tiny white pieces of her, strewn around” (Adichie 33). The broken figurines symbolise Beatrice’s inner shattering, but we perceive it through Kambili’s eyes. The interior world of silence, fear, and tentative awakening is central to the narrative form. Adichie thus ensures that oppression is not merely described externally but felt intimately through a young girl’s consciousness.

The differences between these techniques are significant. Achebe, writing in the late 1950s, prioritises a communal and historical perspective, embedding women’s struggles within the larger story of colonial encounter and cultural decline. Adichie, writing at the turn of the 21st century, foregrounds subjectivity and voice, reflecting a shift in Nigerian literature towards centring female experience. Kambili’s narration not only reveals her own trauma but also creates space for readers to grasp how silence, fear, and eventual resistance shape women’s lives.

A further point of comparison lies in the way narrative focus redistributes power. Achebe’s narrator aligns with Okonkwo’s worldview, describing Ezinma as “the crystal of beauty” and “the centre of her father’s world” (Achebe 108). Her significance is defined largely in relation to her father. Adichie, however, allows Kambili to narrate her own transformation, moving from silence to voice. When Kambili finally laughs openly in Nsukka, she reflects: “The sound was strange, as though it were someone else’s” (Adichie 175). Here, the narrative allows readers to witness the formation of female agency in real time.

Thus, while Achebe’s third-person narration highlights the structural silencing of women by reflecting the patriarchal order of Igbo society, Adichie’s first-person narrative restores

voice to the oppressed, granting depth to female interiorities. The contrast between the two texts demonstrates the evolution of narrative strategies in Nigerian literature, from external observation to interior revelation, thereby reshaping how oppression and resistance are represented.

4.2 Thematic Juxtaposition

Both Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* deal with similar themes of patriarchy, control, silence, ritual, and domestic authority, but they present them in different ways. Achebe sets his story in precolonial Igbo society, while Adichie writes from a postcolonial, Christian Nigerian background. Comparing the two shows how oppression of women continues across time, though it takes new forms.

In *Things Fall Apart*, patriarchy is tied to tradition and the idea of strength. A man's worth is judged by how well he controls his household. The narrator tells us: "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man" (Achebe 37). This shows that the very definition of manhood depends on women's subordination. Okonkwo beats his wives, not only out of anger, but to prove his power. When he violates the Week of Peace by striking Ojiugo, the clan condemns him—but not because of the violence itself, rather because he has broken custom (Achebe 30). Women's suffering is noticed only when it threatens community ritual, not when it harms the women themselves.

Adichie, by contrast, presents patriarchy through religion and the modern family. Papa Eugene uses Catholicism to justify his dominance. He tells his children: "We cannot be part of the heathens. We cannot" (Adichie 71). His faith becomes a weapon of control, where

disobedience is treated as sin. Beatrice and Kambili endure his beatings in silence, and prayer becomes another form of ritual that hides abuse rather than heals it. When Beatrice miscarries after a brutal beating, Kambili describes the broken figurines on the floor: “tiny white pieces of her, strewn around” (Adichie 33). The home, which should be a place of safety, is instead a place of fear and silence.

Silence itself is a key theme in both novels, though in different ways. In *Things Fall Apart*, women’s silence is structural: they are absent from public decision-making and rarely speak in the narrative voice. They exist in the background of Okonkwo’s story. In *Purple Hibiscus*, silence is more personal and psychological. Kambili says: “I wanted to say something, anything, but my lips would not open” (Adichie 47). Her silence is the result of fear, but it also becomes a survival strategy. Beatrice, too, is silent for most of the novel, but in the end, she resists in her own way by poisoning Eugene. Her silence hides her resistance until it is too late for him to control it.

Both novels also explore domestic authority. Okonkwo rules by invoking Igbo ideals of strength, while Eugene rules by invoking Catholic ideals of holiness. Both men use tradition whether cultural or religious to maintain power over their households. Yet both texts also suggest cracks in this authority. Ezinma, though a child, is described as “the crystal of beauty” and Okonkwo’s favourite, showing how her quiet influence matters (Achebe 108). Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* represents an alternative household, where laughter, independence, and open speech are possible. She shows Kambili and Jaja that another way of living exists, outside fear.

By setting these themes side by side, we see that patriarchy in Achebe’s time was tied to tradition, while in Adichie’s it is tied to religion and postcolonial authority. In both cases,

women and children are silenced, controlled, and made to suffer. Yet in both texts, small acts of resistance Ezinma's influence, Beatrice's quiet defiance, Ifeoma's independence show that oppression is never total.

4.3 Synthesis of Comparative Insights

When we place *Things Fall Apart* and *Purple Hibiscus* side by side, a pattern emerges that shows both continuity and change in the oppression of women. Achebe, writing of precolonial Igbo life, portrays a society where patriarchy is tied to tradition, strength, and community rituals. Adichie, writing of postcolonial Nigeria, reveals how patriarchy survives but takes new forms, particularly through religion and modern family structures.

In Achebe's novel, women are silenced not only by men but also by the narrative itself. We rarely hear their inner voices, and their lives are often presented through the lens of Okonkwo's authority. As the narrator puts it, "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man" (Achebe 37). This line captures the cultural expectation that women exist primarily to measure male strength. Their oppression is systemic, embedded in customs, and normalised by society.

In Adichie's novel, the silencing is more intimate and psychological. Kambili's first-person narration gives us access to the fear, confusion, and eventual awakening that silence produces. She confesses: "I did not even think to run, I just stood there, waiting, my whole body tense" (Adichie 42). Unlike Achebe's women, Kambili reveals the inner cost of oppression. Her silence is not merely structural but lived, felt, and described.

Both novels also show how authority within the home mirrors authority in wider society. Okonkwo's violence against his wives reflects the clan's emphasis on male dominance.

Eugene's violence reflects not only his personal cruelty but also the lingering colonial structures of religion and politics. Achebe's domestic tyranny is rooted in tradition; Adichie's is sanctified by Catholic piety. In both cases, women and children are the victims of systems larger than themselves.

Yet both texts also show cracks in the system. Ezinma is presented as wise beyond her years, earning Okonkwo's trust even though she is a girl. Aunty Ifeoma provides an alternative home marked by laughter, independence, and dialogue. Beatrice, though silent for much of the novel, eventually acts in a way that reshapes the family's future. These figures demonstrate that oppression never completely erases agency; resistance may be quiet, but it exists.

Taken together, the novels reveal that while the structures of patriarchy shift across time, their impact on women's lives remains profound. Achebe shows how women are absorbed into tradition without a voice of their own. Adichie shows how women, given narrative space, speak back to power and carve out resistance, even in silence.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

5.1 Summary of Comparative Findings

This study set out to examine how Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* portray the oppression of women, and how these portrayals compare across precolonial and postcolonial Nigerian settings.

In *Things Fall Apart*, oppression is rooted in Igbo tradition and communal expectations. Women are marginalised from leadership, inheritance, and decision-making, and their worth is measured by the authority men exercise over them. Okonkwo's identity as a man is tied to his control of wives and children: "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man" (Achebe 37). The narrative's third-person perspective, centred on Okonkwo, further silences women by rarely giving direct access to their thoughts or emotions. Women endure physical violence, as when Ekwefi is beaten during the Week of Peace, yet their suffering is subsumed under cultural order (Achebe 29).

In *Purple Hibiscus*, oppression takes new forms but remains equally destructive. Eugene uses religion as a justification for domination, presenting disobedience as sin. Domestic abuse is severe and psychologically scarring, leaving Kambili and Beatrice trapped in silence. Kambili recalls: "I wanted to say something, anything, but my lips would not open" (Adichie 47). Here, silence is not only structural but personal, showing the inner

effects of fear. The first-person narration allows readers to experience oppression from within, unlike Achebe's externalised perspective.

Both novels demonstrate how domestic authority mirrors wider structures. Okonkwo enforces clan ideals of strength, while Eugene enforces religious ideals of purity. Both perpetuate fear, trauma, and silence. Yet both texts also suggest possibilities of resistance. Ezinma subtly influences Okonkwo's decisions, while Auntie Ifeoma provides a model of independence and freedom. Beatrice, though quiet for much of the novel, eventually resists Eugene's violence with decisive action. These examples show that women's agency, though often limited, is never fully extinguished.

5.2 Concluding Reflections

Achebe and Adichie, though writing in different historical moments, together highlight the endurance of patriarchal structures in Nigerian society. Achebe shows how tradition positions women as marginal yet indispensable, while Adichie shows how religion and postcolonial authority continue the cycle of silencing and control. At the same time, both texts reveal subtle and overt forms of resistance, suggesting that women's lives cannot be defined solely by oppression.

The comparative approach underscores both continuity and change: oppression persists across time, but its forms shift, and women's strategies of survival and resistance evolve. Where Achebe's narrative gives us women spoken about, Adichie's narrative gives us women speaking for themselves. Together, the novels enrich our understanding of gender, power, and voice in Nigerian literature.

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