

## Original Research Article

# VIOLENCE AND RELIGIOUS FUNDAMENTALISM- TRIGGERED TRAUMA RESPONSE: A STUDY OF SELECTED NIGERIAN PSYCH FICTION

### Abstract

*The topic of religious fanaticism and violence has become a permeating topic in several disciplines. This study is a psychoanalytical reading of the dysfunction in Nigerian psych fiction. It aims at understanding the representation of violence, trauma and dysfunction in the family in selected psych fiction. Focus is placed on the impulses responsible for the actions and response of the characters. Despite the fact that the concept of the family is culture dependent, there exists common goals and purposes among all family relationships and marriages - to procreate, for companionship, to fulfill cultural or societal obligation, and most especially to find happiness and a sense of belonging. Regardless of these similarities among all cultures, there is a high rate of broken marriages and relationship when the family is headed by a religious fanatic. Following the ideology that literature is a representation of life, this essay aims at contributing to the discourse of violence and trauma response from the perspective of literature using the psychoanalytical theory.*

**Key Words:** Family; Dysfunction; Religious fanaticism; Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*; Violence

### Introduction

The existence of a perfect family is disputable. This research is not aimed at describing the perfect family. Instead, the study asserts the existence of a functioning family. A functioning family is not perfect and not without flaws. Despite its imperfections, a functioning family is one that adapts to change and seeks the happiness and well-being of each member. It is the responsibility of the family to raise emotionally, intellectually, and psychologically healthy individuals, that will contribute to the development of the society and the world at large. A dysfunctional family according to David Stoop "is a family in which conflict, misbehavior, and often child neglect or abuse on the part of individual parents occur continually and regularly, leading other members to accommodate such actions. Children sometimes

grow up in such families with the understanding that such an arrangement is normal”  
(3)

The family is an essential unit in creating healthy individuals especially through the provision of necessary emotional and psychological support. Children who lack this support find it difficult in coping outside the family unit and families who are unable to provide this are called dysfunctional families. Physical and material provisions are essential in raising a child. But beyond physical and material needs is the emotional and psychological need which ensures the healthy development of a child. How such individuals grow from one stage to another is determined by the family which unconsciously becomes part of the psychological and mental make-up of that particular individual.

The beauty of psychoanalysis in literature is the fact that it deals with motives, especially hidden or disguised motives as regards the character's action within the text. Thorough investigation is done on how and why characters behave the way they do. Critics in this field believe that there is a reason for every action of an individual, and such reason lies in the unconscious. Hence, the objective of this paper is to investigate violence, fanaticism triggered trauma response in selected psych fiction. Major emphasis will also be placed on examining the portrayal of the violence, family and dysfunction as depicted in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

### ***Violence and religious fanaticism triggered trauma response in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus.***

Mental health according to The World Health Organisation (2020), is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Mental health is fundamental to our individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and most especially enjoy life. On this basis, the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be regarded as a vital concern of individuals, communities and societies throughout the world.

Religious fanaticism which is an ideology that places emphasizes traditional religious texts and rituals, discourages progressive thinking about religion and social issues. The idea of Fanaticism generally opposes anything that questions or challenges ideology. Hence, fanatics are often aggressive towards anyone who does not share their specific set of supernatural beliefs, as they are seen as existential threats to their entire worldview.

Since religious beliefs play a massive role in driving and influencing human behavior throughout the world, it is important to not take for granted religious fanaticism. This is what Adichie focuses on in her ground breaking novel, *Purple Hibiscus*

It is worth noting that a family that is headed by a fanatic creates a home of tension and anxiety. It is therefore important that a stable environment must be provided to children in order to make them functioning and productive members of the society. The most valuable lessons for any individual are first learnt from the family. Individuals are exposed to feelings of hate, anger, depression, attention, respect, care, and most especially, the meaning of love from the family. In asserting this, Gordon Neal states that “the family unit functions as a safe haven and shelter from the outside world. Family is there to protect its members, to love them, and to provide each individual with the necessary basic needs. An extremely tight-knit family also goes beyond that through their unconditional love and dedication to each other without considering what circumstance they may be in”(1).

The unique and unfortunate characteristic of human nature is that the “human nature is a circle” (Randi 2). We often act out the nature of our parent unconsciously. Victims of dysfunctional families where abuse and violence is the order of each day, as adults, one way or the other act out and repeat the same actions as their parent. All these go on without the knowledge that they are ending up exactly like their parents - which is what they often dread the most. Unfortunately, children do not know that they are acting out these roles and parents do not know that they are actually inflicting pain on their children. As far as they are concerned, they are treating their children far better than the way their own parents treated them. Since the family is the first place a child learns what is right and wrong, he unconsciously stores in his memory activities and important action performed by his parents. As an adult, the child begins to act out those actions. This is why Jaja felt the only way to resolve the challenge in the family is to commit the most dangerous form of violence (murder).

In Lois Tyson’s words, “the goal of psychoanalysis is to help us resolve our psychological problems, often called disorders or dysfunctions” (14). This is so because psychoanalysis believes that there is a reason for every action taken by man, and that action is only made possible by the activities of the mind- the unconscious. The unconscious is the store house of those painful experience and emotions, “those wounds, fears, guilty desires and unresolved conflicts” (15). This article will be focusing on the aspect of psychoanalysis known as the ‘id, ego and superego’. The Ego is the part of the personality that maintains a balance between our impulses (our id) and our conscience (our superego) and it is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the end. The Superego is the part of the personality that represents the conscience, the moral part of us which develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our parents or caregivers. It dictates our belief of right and wrong. And the id is the part of the personality that contains our primitive impulses such as thirst, anger, hunger and the desire for instant gratification. The essence of using psychoanalysis approach is to analyze the actions and behaviour of the characters through what we know about the three parts of the mind. In the course of this research, emphasis will be on the section of the mind known as the ‘id’. This

will be done in order to locate what primitive impulses are displayed by the characters and to probe factors responsible for such actions.

The essence of the family in raising emotionally and physically healthy individuals is essential to the development of the society and of the nation as a whole. Parents and guardians pass on values and lessons they believe are essential to their children, though some could be good while others could be unhealthy. In the process of passing these values, parents may resort to using force and at times end up committing several atrocities which may lead to grave consequences. Children who grow up in this type of family usually become emotionally unstable and in many ways find it difficult interacting with other people because they are unable to balance their emotions. In other words, the family as a social unit serves as a precondition for how an individual relates to the larger society.

*Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus* tells the story of one family's fight for freedom and happiness through the eyes of a fifteen year old girl. Kambili recounts the pain and abuses she, her brother Jaja, and her mother faced in the hands of their abusive and religious extremist father, Eugene Achike. The novel begins with a conflict between Jaja and his father, on Palm Sunday due to his refusal to go to church and receive communion. Because Jaja refuses to go to church using the excuse that he did not feel like going, Eugene in anger throws his Missal at him, which misses him but hits the mother's beloved figurine. This act of violence leads to the beginning of the end of the Achike family.

According to Gerlach Peter, "the family is a critical primary group that provides the nurturance, love and emotional sustenance that its members need to be happy, healthy and secure" (7). The importance of the family in the lives of individuals cannot be over-emphasized. The family for many is supposed to be a safe abode, a place where love and friendship are first formed, learnt and experienced. But the moment when the family becomes a dreaded abode, destruction is inevitable. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* tells the story of one family's struggle for freedom, liberty and happiness. The portrayal of family dysfunction is most evident in the entire work. From the first lines of the novel, the author introduces the reader to the confusion and destruction of the Achike family, "*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*". (11)

This incident launches the Achike family into the turmoil and confusion. The Achike family is one that is highly respected in the community. In spite of these achievements, Eugene's personality is at variance. Though Eugene is a respected philanthropist in the community, he is greatly feared at home. He controls his family with an iron fist. Anyone who is not in conformity with his beliefs and who is not able to meet up with his rules and standard is punished in a manner that can be termed

abusive. His great love and fear for his religion makes him go to the extreme in enforcing rules for members of his family.

The issue of religious extremism is currently a hotly debated topic among academics and policy makers (Coyle and Lyons, 2011; Brambilla et al., 2016). This extremism is also closely linked to violence. The respect his family gives him is not only because of the love they have for him but because of the fear they have of him. Eugene's actions are not only motivated by his excessive love for his religion but rather his actions are motivated by his fear of eternal damnation in hell. Hence, he makes it a point of duty to ensure that every member of his family make heaven no matter the cost. When his standard is not met, he resorts into violence that takes the forms of beating, slapping, burning, and any other type of physical abuse he deems fit. He justifies his actions with morality. As far as he is concerned, he is doing God's will. At any provocation, he physically tortures his wife and children. His act of battery in many ways affects his family's state of mind. Kambili the narrator gives a disturbing example of how dysfunction in the family can be traumatic and distressing:

I was in my room after lunch...when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand-carved bedroom door. I imagined the door had got stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true. I sat down, closed my eyes, and started to count. Counting made it seem not that long, made it seem not that bad. Sometimes it was over before I even got to twenty. I was at nineteen when the sounds stopped. I heard the door open...Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border. (41)

Since physical abuse is common in dysfunctional families, the above excerpt clearly shows a case of psychological trauma faced by people from dysfunctional homes. Kambili has been constantly distressed by the frequent battery of her mother so much so that she has come to terms with the state of things in her parent's room. To distract herself from the chaos, she chooses to count numbers and create her own version of the event going on in her parent's room in order to be distracted from the battery of her mother. Beatrice's lifelessness and helplessness is projected by Kambili, hence she is compared to "a sack of rice" (42) in her father's factory showing that Mama is another property that belongs to Eugene meant to be treated whichever way that seems best in his sight. Exposure to violence can harm a child's emotional, psychological and even physical development. Children exposed to violence are more likely to have difficulty in school, abuse drugs or alcohol, act aggressively, suffer from depression or other mental health problems and engage in criminal behavior as adults. For Kambili, she becomes depressed and is unable to laugh or play like are age mates. While in Jaja's case, he becomes aggressive.

Due to the constant physical abuse the children go through, and the control of their daily activities by their father, Jaja and Kambili are not able to interact with other

children. They are not able to live their lives as every other child. This is why Kambili is called a “*backyard snob*” in school. Because Jaja and Kambili are used to living their lives according to the dictates of their father, they found the behaviour of their cousins strange especially when they saw the manner in which the children interact and communicate with one another. Seeing how her cousins play and have fun, Kambili realized that there was something missing in her life. She started to yearn for the same thing which makes her cousin happy and she began to desire to be a child once again:

The two girls said hello, and I smiled...I watched them examine themselves in the mirror...I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way they did, but my lips held stubbornly together. I did not want to stutter, so I started to cough and I ran out into the toilet. (149)

Beatrice, Eugene’s wife, is not treated any better than her children. She is also punished and physically abused if she does not comply or meet up with Eugene’s standard. Jaja and Kambili are forced to witness the constant abuse against their mother-thereby creating a distorted view of the family. Beatrice is always viewed as being frail, powerless and vulnerable. She is often captured by Kambili as having swollen eyes, jagged scar or bleeding from a violent assault from her husband. She can only respond to the physical abuse by cleaning her figurines- which tames the beast in her. Perhaps, this is why Akachi Ezeigbo claims that “women have a tendency to keep quiet and suffer in silence. This is because society has always prescribed silence, reticence, complaisance, patience and gentleness as the greatest virtue of the feminine gender (16).

In order to show that Eugene’s family is dysfunctional, Adichie puts another family where joy and happiness are the order of each day. In describing this family, Kambili says:

Laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma’s house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping. (148)

Auntie Ifeoma’s family is a lot different from Eugene’s family. Because she is a widow, she takes the responsibility of performing the role of both the father and the mother. In other words, she takes both the role of the disciplinary father and the loving and accommodating mother to her three children. Despite the fact that she is a civil servant earning little income, she chooses to fight for what is right. Just like her brother Eugene, she is disciplined and dedicated. She takes her job as a lecturer seriously and does not compromise in her principles no matter how difficult the situation is. Though Catholic, she does not go to the extreme like Eugene- who allows

his love and fear of religion dictates his action. His fear of eternal damnation clouds his sense of judgment. In addition, she does not handle her family with an iron fist. She gives her children the chance and opportunity to grow, socialize and she carefully monitor the changes in her children that she perceives to be negative. She allows them to freely ask questions and challenge laws. This method of child rearing improves the children self esteem. This she does by directing, motivating and driving them towards excellence with love and not fear. Kambili notices the difference between the upbringing of her cousins which gives them the confidence the she and Jaja does not possess. She says:

It was what Aunty Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn't. (231)

Jaja found it easier to accept and adapt to Nsukka simply because he saw his own family as being dysfunctional and confining. Due to the constant physical abuse he faced at home, Jaja opens up to change accepting everything in Nsukka to the surprise of Kambili.

He had slept in the living room, he told me, on a mattress that Obiora unrolled from behind the bedroom door and covered with a wrapper. I listened to him and marveled at the wonder in his voice, at how much lighter the brown of his pupils was. (134)

This shows how empty and lonely Jaja felt despite the fact that he was with his family in Enugu. There is a void in his life that could only be filled with love and friendship which is absent in his family.

Kambili on the other hand found it more difficult to cope. The love, respect and fear she has for her father blinds her to the fact that she is an abused child from a dysfunctional family. Kambili found the usual burst of emotions in her cousins' house as being strange and abnormal.

Laughter floated over my head. Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak. (128)

Being from a dysfunctional home, Jaja and Kambili create roles unconsciously in order to help them survive their family. Jaja adopts the role of a hero of his family. Usually, the hero "is the child who is nine going ninety" (Robert 1). Such child becomes an old soul too soon. It is this role that Jaja adopts at home. Seeing his mother and sister constantly abused by his father, he chooses to defend them by

taking the blame for anything wrong. In many occasions, he chooses to be the hero unconsciously, by receiving any punishment that should have been given to his sister with the aim that his sister will not go through the same physical and psychological pain he is going through.

Kambili on the other hand is shy and timid and she finds it difficult communicating with anyone. She hardly speaks with her brother due to the strict schedule given to them by their father. In many instances, Kambili communicates with her brother using facial expression to express her feelings and thoughts. In addition, in every awkward and troubled situation, Kambili is usually quick to apologize even when she has done nothing wrong.

The psychology of Kambili's development and her brother, Jaja's is unstable. They are deprived of having any emotional life or feelings of themselves. Their home becomes a fortress for them and at the same time a symbol of oppression. The rigid attitude of their father creates a cyst around them, which makes impacts from the outside impenetrable.

Nsukka became the turning point for Jaja and Kambili and the door and gateway to happiness, freedom and self-discovery. Kambili and Jaja learn the true meaning and essence of the family. In Nsukka, they learn that a family is a place filled with people who will love and nurture one another without forceful imposition of will and everyone is given the chance to discover and develop their identity in order to be emotionally and psychologically responsible individuals who would help in the development and growth of the society. Jaja's breakthrough came as a result of his encounter with the purple hibiscus in Auntie Ifeoma's house which sparks up something new in his life. For the first time in a long time, Jaja felt like he has found the place where he belongs. This is why it was not a wonder that for the first time Kambili notices the dimples on Jaja's face when their father called to tell them that they could spend some extra days in Nsukka. Hence, the purple hibiscus becomes a symbol for courage, endurance and change.

Kambili's turning point was not from the impact of the purple hibiscus. Instead, her transformation comes as a result of her encounter with Father Amadi, a young catholic priest. Her encounter with him builds in her feelings she cannot explain or comprehend. She is immediately enchanted by his looks, voice and the totality of his presence.

For the first time in the novel Kambili smiles and laughs. Father Amadi breaks the silence around her. He helps her to be jovial, carefree and joyful. She was only able to be a teenager once again and to enjoy the beauty of childhood and friendship with him. He also teaches her how to play and have fun without feeling it is a sin-as her father has always taught her to believe.

Back in Enugu, things can no longer remain the same way it was in the past. Knowing that if Eugene catches them with the painting of late Papa-Nnukwu (their grandfather), they will face his wrath, Jaja and Kambili chooses to hold on to the painting, preferring to face the consequence. Just as Kambili predicted, he catches them staring at the painting. In anger, he tears the painting. Kambili responded by picking the torn pieces with the hope of protecting the only thing she has left of her grandfather. This action of hers provokes him into beating his daughter to a coma - an extreme form of child abuse:

Papa snatched the painting from Jaja. His hands moved swiftly ... the painting was gone. It already represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have. I suddenly and maniacally imagined Papa-Nnukwu's body being cut in pieces... "No!" I shrieked. I dashed to the pieces on the floor as if saving them would mean saving Papa-Nnukwu "Get up!" Papa said again. I still did not move. He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes...the kicking increased in tempo... I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting...the stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs...More stings. More slaps. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (216-217).

For Kambili, the painting was more than a painting. It represented not only the grandfather she never got to know, but the liberty, freedom and identity that has been denied her. From this action of hers, we see Kambili's growth from timidity, naivety and shyness to boldness, awareness and confidence. It is worth noting that Eugene's action is a product of the environment he was brought up. He would not have acted the way he did if he had not grown up with a white missionary who believed that everything African was substandard and inferior. In his acceptance of Christianity, Eugene erases his culture and tradition. This is one of the reasons why many African were/are skeptical about accepting western religion. This is because it has a tendency of not only rasing indigenous traditional values, but also terming them evil. This issues has been discussed by postcolonial authors like Achebe, Soyinka, Wa Thiong'o etc. In addition, because the human experience is in circles - meaning we unconsciously act out the same behavior as our parents/guardians-, Eugene raises his children the same way he was raised. Because his white guardian physically abused him, he grew up believing that just as his guardian was justified by God, so also is he, justified by God to punish his wife and children when they are not living up to the standard he has set.

Eugene remains the most amazing character in the novel. His actions are in contrast. His religious extremism blinds him from noting the difference between social, parental, moral and religious responsibility. He forbids his family from identifying with anything traditional yet he accepts the title '*Omelora*'. He abides with the

Christian doctrine of not marrying more than one wife in order to be perceived holy by others, yet he does not regard his wife as his other half and partner. He gives to the community generously whether they are Christians or not, yet he fails to provide for his own father because he upholds his traditions.

Because Beatrice could not take the abuse any more, she poisons her husband and that gradually led to his death. All the years of forbearance, tolerance and silence in the face of extreme battering, oppression and subjugation has built up in Beatrice the deadly poison of revenge. It is possible that her action results from the desperation to set herself and her children free from the 'monster' her husband has become. To show that the children are tired of their abusive father and their dysfunctional home, Kambili does not get angry at her mother for killing her father, rather she gets angry because her mother chose to kill him by poisoning his tea- the same tea Eugene forces them to take love sips from.

For a long, silent moment I could think of nothing...Then I thought of taking sips of Papa's tea, love sips..." Why did you put it in his tea?" I asked Mama, rising. My voice was loud. I was almost screaming. Why in his tea" (294)

Unfortunately, rather than his death bringing peace to every member of the Achike family, it only brought pain, frustration and resentment. Hence Jaja continues to feel guilty and bitter for not having done enough to protect his mother and sister despite taking responsibility for the death of his father.

His eyes are too full of guilt...to see his reflection in my eyes, the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could. He will never think that he did enough, and he will never understand that I do not think he should have done more. (309)

Despite the fact that the Achike family is dysfunctional in many ways which almost led to its disintegration, the narrator, Kambili, chooses to amend the wound that threatens to utterly destroy every member of her family. She takes charge of the realities on the ground, after her brother's arrest bringing her closer to the realities of corruption which she and her mother engage in to finally seek Jaja's release. Just like the purple hibiscus, she becomes strong and courageous. After securing Jaja's release from prison after three years, Kambili together with her mother plans to take Jaja to Nsukka and then to America in order to bring back the happiness and joy that has faded away from the family.

We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we'll go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma...and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus" I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama's shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles...The new rain will come down soon. (310)

## Conclusion

This is the paper investigated religious fanaticism and violence in a Nigerian psych fiction. Emphasis was placed on a psychoanalytical reading of the dysfunction in the Achike family. The importance of the family in the lives of individuals cannot be over-emphasized. The family for many is supposed to be a safe abode, a place where love and friendship are first formed, learnt and experienced. But the moment when the family becomes a dreaded abode, destruction is inevitable. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* tells the story of one family's struggle for freedom, liberty and happiness

As stated earlier, a dysfunctional family is one in which conflict, misbehavior and often abuse on the part of individual family members occur continually and regularly. And in addition, the dysfunction in the family does not quickly foster the disintegration of such family as evident in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Hence, despite several life threatening abuses faced by each family member of the Achike family, amazingly enough, the family does not disintegrate. In other words, members from such family tend to think that the happenings in their family are perfectly normal.

In addition, the greatest implication of physical and verbal abuse is more psychological than physical. These abuses not only lead to physical injuries, but leads to the damage of the mind and psyche of its members. This can be seen Beatrice who becomes inactive and subservient without any desire of her own; while her children are unable to live a healthy social life like other kids their age.

Hence, because the family is the basic unit of the society, it is expedient that every tool must be put in place to achieve a healthy and successful family because "for civilization to succeed, the family must succeed" (William Bennett). Therefore it is important that the perception and perspective of individuals be reformed and transformed because it is the input individuals put in the growth of their family that will determine their output to the development of the world at large, hence, "to put the nation in order, we must first put the family in order. And to put the family in order, we must first cultivate our personal life; we must first set our hearts right" (Confucius).

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