

## Womanhood in Africa: An Investigative Appraisal into the Treatment of Women in Two Selected Nigerian Novels

Samuel Adewumi

The Department of English, Clemson University, Clemson, SC.

[sadewum@g.clemson.edu](mailto:sadewum@g.clemson.edu)

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i3.1764>

**APA Citation:** Adewumi, S. (2024). Womanhood in Africa: An Investigative Appraisal into the Treatment of Women in Two Selected Nigerian Novels. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 6(3).30-41. <http://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v6i3.1764>

### Received:

12/06/2024

### Accepted:

19/07/2024

### Keywords:

African Societies, Feminism, Family, Home, Childbearing

### Abstract

*This paper contributes to a lively discussion in the field of African literature, delving into various misconceptions about women. In a typical African society, there is a perception that women have fewer opportunities compared to their male counterparts who enjoy unrestricted benefits. This research reveals a startling revelation: the roots of these segregations extend far beyond their surface representation. Qualitative findings reveal that women are marginalized at all points of their existence—from the structure of their body, marriage, and childbearing to their total existence as women. Despite feminist scholars analyzing gender from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, they have paid little attention to female issues specific to their roles in the home. To fill this gap, this research examines the ways in which female rights, freedoms, and free will are being assessed in the contemporary African societies Adichie and Shoneyin present in their works, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Secret Life of Baba Segi's Wives*, respectively.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Imagine living under constant surveillance, under constant control and monitoring of your every move and action. Imagine a life where you have to live in perpetual fear of erring—of breaking an unwritten set of domineering laws. Imagine living every day in constant fear that even the smallest mistakes could result in violent punishment for you and your children. In reality, these are the fates of numerous African women. Abubakar (2015) asserts that “the socio-cultural environment has relegated them to the margins” (p. 4). This is to say that, at many levels of human endeavor, women have practically been victims of acute misesteem.

All over the world, issues surrounding women’s positions, functions, and roles have become apparent. Research has revealed that women globally have fewer opportunities for education and economic participation than their male counterparts. In fact, as revealed by the International Labour Organization (2022), “finding a job is tougher for women than it is for men.” To corroborate this idea, the United Nations in its Gender Gap Report reports that, although it has been 40 years since the adoption of the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979), “discrimination against women remains in place.” The report goes further to highlight that until 2017, nearly half a billion women and girls aged 15 years and over were illiterate, and just 39% of rural girls attended secondary school. Regrettably, the World Economic Forum Report (2022) estimates that it will take approximately 132 years to close gender gaps at the current rate of progress.

Focusing on Africa, specifically Nigeria, the concept of womanhood has been severely marginalized and undermined. Washaly (2018) articulates this clearly:

In most societies, women typically experience subjugation and unequal treatment. Several contexts depict them as imperfect and impure. All of these utter abuses and maltreatment are due to incorrect, and often false, perceptions and interpretations of male strength. (p.4)

To support the assertion above, Olanrewaju (2018) also gives a clear insight into the pitiable status and position of women in contemporary Nigerian society. He believes that “the female has been largely disadvantaged in terms of social standing or status as well as fundamental human rights compared to their male counterpart” (p. 1). Traditional, cultural, and religious beliefs in predominantly patriarchal societies have largely supported this trend. Unfortunately, the defining status and functions of women have been reduced to nothingness due to the gap that the society in which they find themselves has created.

From the above, we can say that the patriarchal nature of society is the primary enabler of the denigration women endure. To support this view, Beavior (1974) argues that in patriarchal African society, men perceive “women as entirely different from men” (p. 17) and so treat women differently and negatively from men. However, since the emergence of the feminist movement, things have begun to change. In fact, one notable factor that helped to promulgate this movement is that, as Fwangyil (2011) puts it, “women are generally regarded as docile, passive, and weak in most male-dominated societies. Hence, the women work hard to debunk this age-long myth by asserting themselves and proving their mettle, regardless of the obstacles they face” (p. 44). The feminist movement notably gave rise to feminist writings, which called for women’s rights and equality. Females, particularly in Nigeria, produce these writings because, as Washaly (2018) rightly submits, “No one can write or depict the impact of gender violence like a female writer” (p. 18).

In furtherance to the assertion above and to ascertain the duties of contemporary female writers, especially as issues that concern women, Amartey (2013) asserts that “...female writers normally focus on resistance to all forms of patriarchal behaviour and the belief that women can live their lives the way they want to and be responsible for their own livelihoods and future” (p. 1). He goes further to explain that the female novel, as a protest novel against patriarchy, shows the inequalities and abuses inflicted on women by patriarchal traditions inherent in the society. This is to say that novels written by contemporary feminist writers are mostly filled with protest voices that berate the existing patriarchal hierarchies.

### **1.1. Research Problem**

There is a significant gender disparity in Nigeria, particularly when it comes to sociocultural norms and societal dictatures. This implies that women face certain constraints imposed by the socio-cultural dictates and ideologies of their respective societies. Regrettably, society has little or no resistance to these ideologies, which favour the male gender at the expense of their female counterparts. However, with increasing awareness about gender consciousness, voices have risen, particularly in the literary sphere, to enlighten women about the dangers of patriarchy and the need for total gender emancipation.

### **1.2. Aim of Study**

This research aims to critically examine womanist ideologies in the contemporary African societies Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and Lola Shoneyin have portrayed in their stories, *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, respectively.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

It is essential to declare that the broader theory, 'feminism,' differs from person to person. Nahal (1991), in an article titled *Feminism in English Fiction*, defines feminism as "a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband, the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group" (p. 30). In the same vein, Ilboudo (2007) succinctly puts that "feminism is a doctrine which advocates the expansion of rights, of the role of women in the society; which fights to establish social justice and to get rid of gender inequality" (p. 17). Adichie (2014) furthers Ilboudo's argument when she gives a striking, yet paradoxical, definition of who a feminist is. According to her, a feminist is "a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes" (p. 12).

However, it would be dutifully right to point out that feminism, particularly in Africa, is not a one-way channel; it varies in styles and approaches. To firmly establish this, Naomi (2016) highlights the variants of feminism. She describes them as "Womanism, Stiwanism, negro-feminism, Motherism, Formalism and Snail-sense Feminism" (p. 61–74). African womanism however, will be the focus of this research. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in 1988 defines womanism as "a black outgrowth from feminism." In her words:

Womanism is black-centered and accommodationist. It believes in women's freedom and independence, unlike radical feminism; it wants meaningful union between black women, black men, and black children, and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist position (p. 63).

Notably, womanism, particularly in Africa, was made popular by Clenora Hudson-Weems, when she developed the idea of 'Africana womanism.' Hudson-Weems (1993), sees Africana womanism as "a movement created so that women can create their own criteria for assessing their realities, both in thought and in action" (p. 50). She further stresses that Africana womanism is essentially based on eighteen ideologies, as given by Clenora Hudson-Weems in the late 1980s. These ideological pillars are off-spring of Africana womanism, and they include: self-naming, self-definition, family-centeredness, in concert with men, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, genuine sisterhood, male compatibility, recognition, ambition, nurturer, strength, respect, respect for elders, mothering, and spirituality. Hence, for this research, it is best to examine these texts through the lens of womanist feminism. This is because women writers in Africa, apart from the fact that they consider themselves feminists, Hudson-Weems herself believes that this ideology is peculiar to every woman of African descent.

### 2.1.Variants Of Feminism In Africa

The emergence of feminism in Africa ushered in a completely new understanding of the concept. To a large extent, the concept gained acceptance and embraced a number of perceived features. Filomina Chioma Steady (1982) defines feminism as "emphasizing female autonomy and cooperation; nature over culture; the centrality of children; mothering and kingship" (p. 14). According to Steady's definition, in Africa, the concept encapsulates African men, women, and children, whereas its western counterpart aims to be more direct. Mekgwe's (2008) argument further emphasizes this concept when he states:

The rationale is that, if African feminism is to succeed as a human reformation project, it cannot accept separation from the opposite sex. Eschewing male's exclusion becomes

one defining feature of African feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualized in the west (p. 16).

From the above, it is evident that African feminism acknowledges the extreme marginalization and segregation that the male gender has imposed upon it. However, it acknowledges the role of men in liberating women from the constraints of chauvinism. Like its western counterpart, African feminism also has branches. Newtona Johnson (2008) quotes Hudson-Weems to justify the need for these branches:

...on the basis of different experiences, feminism differs from woman to woman. She therefore proposes that black women create their own name and define themselves and their critical perspectives and agenda in a way that reflects their particular experiences and African culture (p.21).

With the above, she tries to say that, since experiences differ from person to person, this concept of feminism carries different interpretations for different individuals and societies.

## **2.2.Womanism**

When womanism first emerged in Africa, it garnered a positive perception, leading many African women to prefer it over the term “feminist”. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunnyemi is one of the female writers who embraced the concept well upon its emergence. She defines feminism as:

Black-centered... Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand and that by doing so, they will see women as a necessary part of existence (Ogunyemi, 1998, p. 13).

As seen from above, the two opinions on Womanism are similar, as they do not in any way bring the “enslavement of women by men” into their definition. However, Regina Ode presents a perspective that differs slightly from the first two opinions discussed. According to her:

Womanism is the result of black African-American women’s agitation to emancipate themselves from the double enslavement of both their white male owners and their black male spouses. The black African-American woman initiated this movement to address their peculiar state of subordination (p. 4).

The reason she articulates this quite strict argument is not known; however, she presumably wants to bring us into her realization of what she perceives the aim of an average black woman to be. Consequently, this research will employ a womanist approach to feminist criticism for its study. It would make use of elements of womanism, particularly the intersection of societal and familial relationships, in the struggle for women’s freedom.

## **2.3.Stiwanism**

This is another branch of feminism that aims to deflagrate the constraints that patriarchy has placed on women, with a great focus on society. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie propelled this branch of feminism to prominence. In giving meaning to the theory, Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) says that:

My agenda for women in Africa without having to answer charges of imitateness or having to constantly define their agenda on the African continent in relation to other feminisms, in particular, Euro-American feminisms, which are unfortunately under the siege of everyone. (p.4)

According to Ogunidipe-Leslie's explanation above, Stiwanism differs from its European counterpart in that it rejects the western version of feminism, which strives to be more practical and direct.

Also, Stiwanism aims to partner with the male gender rather than regard them as oppressors in society. Ogunidipe-Leslie (2007) stresses further in her argument that "African women do not need liberation because they have never been in bondage" (p. 13). Going by what she says here, one would not be wrong to conclude that all that Stiwanism seeks for women is to empower them and give them a voice in society. Subjectively, this branch appears very ideal and deserves more laudable recognition than it has received.

#### **2.4.Motherism**

Motherism, as the name implies, operates on the premise of a mother's role. No wonder Ode (2011) sees the concept as "an African feminist theory that sees the relationship of a woman in terms of reproduction and childcare" (p. 90). In essence, Obi agrees that the woman is responsible for childcare and general family care. This means that African women want to raise awareness of everything that affects their children. Despite its seeming insignificance, many African women who embraced this branch viewed it as fundamental; they believed it highlighted their essential role in family control, emphasizing their role within the family.

#### **2.5.The Curt Stigma Against The Female Body**

One issue African feminist writers aim to address like Shoneyin and Adichie have done, is the ignominious label that patriarchal society has placed on the female body. In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Bolanle, the youngest of Baba Segi's four wives, has her husband label her womb as barren, asserting that she is incapable of bearing him a child. However, it turns out after a medical examination that Bolanle's womb is in actuality fertile, and on the other hand, her husband suffers from infertility, a fact that leaves Baba Segi in confusion as to the actual father(s) of his other children. Therefore, the other three wives, in an attempt to avoid the negative stigmas their husbands and society would impose due to their lack of children, are venturing outside of their marriages in hopes of conceiving. Their husband and society will label them as barren if they do not give birth.

When it is obvious to her that her husband's sperm does not contain the "seed" she needs, the first wife, Iya Segi, starts the process of finding what she calls a "seed." In her words:

I was childless and restless... My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit... Then I had an idea... If my husband did not have a seed, what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere? So, I found the seed and planted it in my belly (Shoneyin, 2010, p.215).

Taju, her husband's chauffeur, becomes the seed donor, as we would expect. As soon as she conceives, happiness returns to the household, and her place in the household gets established. When her other co-wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi, arrive too, she gives them this secret to

happiness. Iya Tope, the second wife, seeks her guidance as their husband, weary of her constant infatuation, cautions her, “If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will return to him” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 84). The novel is striking in that Baba Segi, as a husband, and the society that rides on the wings of the patriarchy in which they live compel the women to commit adultery in order to bring home the actual demands of society—babies.

However, this does not mean that Bolanle, though educated, does not suffer the same stigma. She does but in a slightly different way. In several passages of the text, she refers to herself as what society sees her to be, “an empty shell.”

In the case of Iya Tope, her father, a poor farmer, gives her out to Baba Segi in the year of bad harvests in exchange for the money he needs to make up for the loss he incurred during a poor farming season, which Baba Segi consents to hastily. At a point in the text, Iya Tope is caught soliloquizing that “I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange—a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms, and two legs.” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 82)

The women, as seen from above, have all in one way or another been derogated as pertaining to their bodies, even to the level of mere property a man can own and dispose of at any time he wishes. This, however, has formed a pressing issue, one that feminist writers like Shoneyin and Adichie have come together to berate.

## **2.6. Marriage Institution As A Tool For Female Oppression**

Iya Segi’s marriage to Ishola Alao (Baba Segi) first reveals the portrayal of masculine tendencies that devalue women’s status. After her marriage to Ishola Alao (Baba Segi), Iya Segi continues to pursue her interest in business, having persuaded Baba Segi to permit her to trade in sweets. Sweet wholesaling, however, appears to be a pretext for her cement business, which then dictates that Iya Segi learn to drive a car. According to Shoneyin's portrayal of society, the cement venture and driving are exclusively associated with the masculine class.

While single, Iya Segi is so rich that she could afford, on her own, to buy a piece of land and build herself a house. However, these remain unachievable considering the society in which she finds herself—a society that has created a disparity as to what a woman can achieve from what a man can, and that all a woman has becomes her husband’s as soon as she gets married. Little wonder that when Iya Segi develops plans to own a house for herself, her mother explains to her that “the village men will say you are ridiculing them, doing what they can’t!” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 97)

Similarly, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* points out, in several passages, instances of female oppression orchestrated by patriarchy under the guise of marriage and family building. As seen in the story, the violent actions of Eugene toward his wife totally violate not only the tenets of Roman Catholicism, which he ignorantly represents, but also the dictates on which a balanced, love-driven society is formed.

Eugene causes a lot of harm to his wife, to the point of killing an unborn child. When this incident happens and Beatrice returns from the hospital, as someone whom African society terms a good woman should behave, and in the name of protecting her marriage, she returns from the hospital acting very normal, shielding her husband as if nothing has happened, as seen in Adichie (2003):

There was an accident; the baby is gone,” she said. I moved back a little, stared at her belly. It still looked big, still pushed at her wrapper in a gentle arc. Was Mama sure the baby was gone? I was still staring at her belly when Sisi came in”. As always, she can’t blame her husband for all the harm he has caused and as such, dare not tell her kids about it, though they know the truth. (p. 42)

Normally, Beatrice would have left her husband’s house after experiencing all these hardships. However, her marriage binds her to her husband, and predictably, the abuse persists, leading her to stay and endure further hardship. However, her husband’s constant beatings led to Beatrice’s second miscarriage, which marked a turning point in their relationship. She must have thought that continuing to live in the bondage of marriage could mean an end to her life; she thus defiles the embargo that marriage has placed on her by not minding what society and the church would say, by retaliating against her husband, which ultimately signalled a partial dissolution of her family.

As portrayed by the narrator, Kambili, Sisi, Eugene’s housemaid, harbours a deep-seated resentment towards Eugene’s mistreatment of Beatrice. Regrettably, her job primarily involves cooking, cleaning, and following orders. However, Beatrice’s disclosure of her intention gives Sisi her chance. Jaja too; he must have been growing a vicious seed in himself against his father as a result of his constant battering of their mother. Little wonder why he doesn’t give a second thought and prefers to be a scapegoat, though innocent, to protect the women he loves—Mama and Kambili.

### **2.7.Men’s Supremacy And Its Obnoxious Effect On Women: Physical Abuse And Torture**

Adichie, in her novel, presents two kinds of women: the one perceived to be culturally good by African society, as in the character of Beatrice Achike, and the one who maintains her stance and fails to adhere to the dictates of society, as seen in the character of Auntie Ifeoma.

The text portrays Mama as quiet, scared, and completely obedient to her husband. In fact, even in the face of extreme battering that costs her pregnancies and almost her life, she remains in the marriage to endure, as invariably required by the society in which she finds herself, not until she gets pushed to the wall towards the end of the novel.

Not only does Eugene’s glorification of tyranny deal Mama an excruciating blow, but it also deeply affects Kambili. The harsh treatment she endures as a child taints her voice and sexuality. In fact, Rackley (2015) reports that “Eugene ensures that the female reproduction systems of Kambili and Beatrice, Kambili’s mother, are always considered subordinate in relation to religion.” Interestingly, he goes further in the page, saying that Eugene justifies his persistent emotional and physical abuse [by suffusing it] with the vocabulary of love and faith. In other words, one would not be wrong to conclude that Eugene premises his constant maltreatment of his wife and children under the canopy of purity and spirituality; he wants them to remain pious, holy, and religious. As seen in several instances of the text, Eugene brutalizes his family members in the name of acting as God’s assistant. For instance, he beats up his wife so much that she loses her unborn child, and Beatrice pleads to stay back while visiting a British priest because of the occasional morning sickness she suffers from. In a lighthearted manner, Eugene guides the family in a prayer session to ask for forgiveness for Beatrice’s transgressions. He even tells his children to recite sixteen novenas so that Mama can be forgiven for her sin; “I did not think—I did not even think to think—what Mama needed to

be forgiven for,” Kambili expresses (Adichie, 2003, p. 35–36). This shows how turbulent an experience Kambili grows up having.

Kambili, her brother, and her mother essentially experience two types of physical violence: instantaneous and sudden, and premeditated and thoughtfully planned. Adichie depicts Kambili’s family as being under military rule, with Papa Eugene completely dominating the home. Papa Eugene never approves of anything, and his words hold sway over the other family members. His expectations of his family are excessive and difficult for the children to live up to. He expects them to be academically successful, outstanding amongst other kids in their respective classes, and always obey their father’s orders. The consequences for disobeying are severe, as Papa Eugene is quick to get enraged and use extremely stringent modes of punishment when he deems necessary so as to, according to him, “stop them from sinning” (Adichie, 2003, p. 194).

### **2.8.A Typical Patriarchal Society And Its Notable Occurrences**

Though expressed from the spectrum of the home, Adichie in particular presents what a male-dominated society looks like and the experiences of women in these societies. She presents a relatable contemporary African society ruled by men and the outcome of their rule, especially as it concerns its effect on women. This, as a matter of fact, is not new in the works of African feminist writers; little wonder Agboola (2017) submits that:

More feminist scholars, in fact, need to start an urgent discussion on the happenings in various societies controlled by men. There is a lot of disservice going on against women in these societies already, which is left unreported. Failure to write about them and ultimately relate them to literature will now further contribute to the obnoxious war going against them [women] (p. 78).

Adichie begins the novel with the portrayal of Eugene’s iron-handedness toward his immediate family—Beatrice, Kambili, and Jaja—which eventually leads to his death. Eugene is portrayed as extremely stern and has high standards. The moral, religious, and academic standards he sets for his family and his rigid approach to achieving them at all costs are too much and too heavy for them to bear. It makes life tiresome, mechanical, and monotonous. His conflict of ideas starts when he tries to stop his last child, Jaja, from flouting his rigid rules. He flares and vents his anger on Palm Sunday for not going to communion. And because of that, “Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *etagere*” (Adichie, 2003, p. 3).

Eugene makes life boring and mechanical in the family, no matter the circumstances. He has no room for excuses, even if one is near death. All he cares about is that his wishes get fulfilled. He shows minimal concern for an individual’s conscience or expression. This is further stressed in the narration of Kambili, which:

I pushed my textbook aside, looked up, and stared at my daily schedule, pasted on the wall above me. Kambili was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as Jaja was written on the schedule above Jaja’s desk in his room... I wondered when Papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother.... Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, and prayer from sleep. He revised them often (Adichie, 2003, p. 23–24).



If we are to embrace the argument above, then our conclusion would centre on the glimpse Adichie has made us catch—the fact that a home vis-à-vis society managed by patriarchs is absolutely devoid of humour and freedom; therein is a complete illusion.

Regrettably, these constraints stem from the misapplication of the colonial administrative method. This is because Papa, Eugene, and lots of men in contemporary African society are products of colonialism. But rather than instilling the good deeds of colonialism into their homes and practical lives, they go ahead to ensure their wives and children go through similar hardships they had with the colonial masters before earning the privileges they now enjoy, hence pushing their wives and children beyond limit. This is contained in the passage where Aunty Ifeoma explains to Kambili that Papa is a product of colonialism, though a misguided product. In fact, Papa himself is caught telling Kambili in Adichie (2003), the cause of his stern ironhandedness against his family, that:

Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with all these privileges... I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission. I was a houseboy. Nobody dropped me off at school. I walked eight miles every day to Nimo until I finished elementary school (p. 47).

With this, Adichie justifies the condition of ‘you must suffer because I suffered’ thought, literally reverberating in the thought of a typical African man. To put it more practically, Adichie corroborates the current growing norm among Africans. There are now growing cases in Africa of fathers leaving no inheritance for their immediate families and willing their complete wealth to strangers or people they have not met before. This, according to them, is to ensure their families go through the kinds of hardships they have gone through before acquiring such a level of wealth. On his part, Eugene enforces this draconian trend in his Eurocentric religious practice, which hinges on punishment, self-denial, and strict abidance. He frequently punishes his family for putting their physical needs before their Catholic faith. He doles out two of his most brutal beatings because Beatrice, who has morning sickness, would rather stay in the car than visit Father Benedict, and because Kambili, because of her menstrual cramps, takes painkillers with food instead of waiting to break her fast at mass. Eugene’s belief in punishing his family stems from his own childhood experiences, especially an incident when a white priest caught him masturbating. He tells Kambili this when he says that: “[The priest] asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it” (Adichie, 2003, p. 196). After discovering that his children had spent several nights at Papa Nnukwu’s place without telling him, Eugene punishes them by scalding their feet, symbolizing the consequences of walking into sin. You burn your feet.” (Adichie, 2003, p. 194) He does this to remind them of what he similarly went through while growing up. Though strange and weird, Adichie brings to our attention another ludicrous practice capable of causing total disharmony in a space controlled solely by men.

Again, Eugene’s reign of terror extends beyond just killing Kambili’s voice; it additionally wrecks her sexuality. Through violent punishments, Eugene ensures that the female reproduction systems of his wife, Beatrice, and his daughter, Kambili, are completely decimated and considered second to their Catholic faith. Eugene justifies his “persistent emotional and physical abuse [by suffusing it] with the vocabulary of love and faith” (Wallace, 2012, p. 471). To put it mildly, Eugene abuses his family members but justifies this abuse through excuses of love and his desire for his family to remain pious in God’s eyes. When Kambili finally leaves the tyrannical auspices of Eugene, she begins to blossom sexually. For the first time since childhood, Kambili’s “mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes, and sings” (Okuyade, 2011, p. 160).

Eugene is a fanatic. A fanatic is like one suffering from myopia—who has his sight to a limited length. This connotes that his reasoning does not portray originality and logic, and this is the problem he (Brother Eugene) has. Surprisingly, though Beatrice, like Eugene, comes from a strict Catholic background, what calls for concern in the novel is the fact that while Beatrice is accommodating of other religions in her dealings, Eugene is extremely fanatical and considers those who do not follow his religious beliefs “heathens.” He restrains his children from speaking their indigenous language, Igbo, which he regards as a “heathen language” or “illicit language.” On one occasion, he chases Anikwenwa out of his compound because he “had decreed that heathens were not allowed in his compound” (Adichie, 2003, p. 64).

### **2.9. Women As Symbols Of Solidarity, Physical, And Psychological Strength**

Feminist writers are not only required to clamour for equal representation of both genders in the rulership of society; they are also saddled with the responsibility of showing the strengths of women to survive in a hostile environment, as against the popular presentation of them as weak and outrightly submissive. Shoneyin projects this first in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, using the character of Bolanle.

As seen through the actions of Iya Segi and Iya Femi—from smearing Bolanle’s books with vegetable oil and charcoal, intentionally tearing off some pages of her books and hiding them under the kitchen cupboard due to hatred for her university degree, banishing her friends from visiting their house with the excuse that they “they were bad role models for the daughters within the family, especially Segi, who was at an impressionable age...” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 54), so when she gets pushed hard on one occasion till she stumbles over and hit her head on the hard floor tiles, resulting in a bloody injury (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 161)—they do not hide their hatred for her. To make matters worse, the children of Bolanle’s co-wives also follow suit in the hostile treatment of Bolanle by their mothers. This is revealed in Shoneyin (2010), where Bolanle explains that:

Iya Femi’s sons won’t sit on a chair I even vacated. Once I walk past them within the corridor, they address the wall and flatten themselves against it. Regardless of what percentage times I offer them sweets, they treat me as if I even have a contagious disease (p. 23).

However, despite these provocations, Bolanle still remains serene that a reader may not easily comprehend her true nature as a woman. In fact, Iya Tope (the second wife), who wouldn’t connive with Iya Segi and Iya Femi to execute their evil plans, admits to the gentility of Bolanle when she admits on page 54 that:

Iya Segi was wrong about the skin of educated types. The more those two poked Bolanle, the more mercy her eyes showed, and the more her hands opened to the youngsters. I have even never known anyone like Bolanle before. Even after two years of their wickedness, she still greets them every morning. What more do they want? (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 54)

Bolanle is so determined to beat all challenges on her path, many thanks to the optimistic pronouncements she makes to herself frequently: “One day, they’re going to all love me. I will be able to buy their affection with the cash Baba Segi gives me if I even have to... at some point, they’re going to all accept me as a member of this family.” (Shoneyin, 2010, p. 23) This optimistic attitude she adopts saves her on a few occasions, like when she almost gets thrown out of her matrimonial home.

### Womanhood in Africa: An Investigative Appraisal into the Treatment of Women in Two Selected Nigerian Novels

The second character Shoneyin uses in projecting this concept of strength is Iya Tope, Baba Segi's second wife. Iya Tope's character is developed in such a way that she has every reason to be bitter, brute, and angry. The reason for this rests on the manner in which she enters Alao's house. She literally gets exchanged by her father for a few cash the year he experienced a poor harvest. In spite of Iya Tope's sad fate, she neither shows any sign of regret nor intimidation. Her courage and steadfastness are built on the question of why she should be bartered for a cause she herself didn't bargain for.

### 3. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

As depicted in *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this research delves into the pervasive gender atrocities women face in Nigerian societies. Additionally, this research explores the psychological and physical traumas women endure in polygamous homes, as well as in situations of forced and toxic marriages, as a result of the acute marginalization of women. This ideology manifests itself in the fate of women in a patriarchal society, where they are viewed as inferior.

This research has also revealed that women should have access to leadership roles to address gender conflict issues, particularly in Nigerian society, as female writers are increasingly using power as a tool for self- and societal emancipation.

Again, through this research, some societal issues that need changes have been addressed, and parents are hereby called upon not to allow their female children to be sidelined in any affairs as long as leadership and participation are concerned.

### REFERENCES

- Abubakar, N. (2015). *Interrogating The Northern Nigerian Society: A Case Study of Razinat T. Mohammed's Habiba*. University of Maiduguri Press.
- Adichie, C. N. (2003). *Purple Hibiscus*. Chapel Hill, N.C: Algonquin Books Of Chapel Hill.
- Adichie, C. N. (2014). *We should All be Feminists*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Agboola M. A. (2017) *The Roles of Women in The Development of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature*. University of Ilorin Press, Nigeria.
- Amartey, C. (2013). *Articulation of Womanism in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Emecheta's The Joys of Motherhood*. [E-book], Retrieved from <http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh>
- Beauvoir, S. D. (1974). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books: New York.
- Filomina, S. (1981), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge: Schneckman Publishing Company Inc.
- Fwangyil, G. A. (2011), *A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*. University of Jos Press.
- Hudson-Weems, C. (2007). *African Womanist Theory, A Sequel to Africa Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Trenton: African world Press.
- Ilboudo, M. (2007). *Le féminisme au Burkina Faso: mythes et réalités*. In *Recherches féministes*: 163-177
- International Labour Organization. (2022). *The Gender Gap in Employment: What's Holding Women Back?* Retrieved from [www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#intro](http://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#intro)

- Johnson, N. (2008). Staking Claims: Theorizing Female Agency and Empowerment Through Black Women's Literary Writings. *Research in Africa Literatures*. 39. 117-124. 10.135/ral.0.0019
- Mekgwe, P. 2008. Theorizing African Feminism(s): The "Colonial" Question. *QUEST: An Overview. African Journal of Philosophy / Revue Africaine de Philosophie* XX:11–22.
- Nahal, C. (1991). *Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations: Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Prestige Books.
- Naomi, N. (2016). African Feminism and Their Challenges. *Journal of Literary Studies*. Retrieved from [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_feminism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_feminism)
- Naomi, N. (2016). African Feminism and Their Challenges. *Journal of Literary Studies*. Retrieved from [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/African\\_feminism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_feminism)
- Ode, R. (2011). Women, their own worst enemies: A Comparative Study of Tess Onwueme's *Go Tell it Women* and *The Reign of Wazobia*. *African Journals Online*, 6(1), 81-101. Retrieved from [www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm/article/download/76561/6701](http://www.ajol.info/index.php/cajtm/article/download/76561/6701)
- Ogundipe-Leslie, M. (2007). Stiwanism: Feminism in an African context. In T. Olaniyani, & A. Quayson (Eds), *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (pp. 542-550). USA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (1988). *Women and Nigerian Literature in Perspectives on Nigerian Literature 1700 till present*. Guardian Books Nigeria Ltd.
- Okuyade, O. (2011). Narrating Growth In The Nigerian Female Bildungsroman. *Anachronist: 152-170. Literary Reference Center. Web. 26 Jan. 2015.*
- Olanrewaju, A. (2018). *Patriarchy and Matriarchy in the Novels of Three Selected African Female Writers*. University of Ilorin Press.
- Rackley, L. E. (2015) *Gender Performance, Trauma, and Orality in Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun and Purple Hibiscus*.
- Shoneyin, T. A. (2010). *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. New York: William Morrow.
- United Nations Gender Report. (n.d.) *Women and Girls— Closing the Gender Gap*. Retrieved from [www.un.org/en/un75/women\\_girls\\_closing\\_gender\\_gap](http://www.un.org/en/un75/women_girls_closing_gender_gap)
- Wallace, C. R. (2015) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Purple Hibiscus" And The Paradoxes Of Postcolonial Redemption. *Christianity & Literature* 61.3 (2012): 465-483. *Literary Reference Center*.
- Washaly, N. (2018). The Representation of Gender Violence in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. [E-book]. Retrieved from *International Journal of English Language: literature in Humanities; UGC approved journal: www.ijellh.com* Vol. 5
- World Economic Forum. (2022). *Global Gender Report 2022*. Retrieved from [www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/digest](http://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022/digest)

**AUTHOR'S BIO**

*Samuel Adewumi is a grad student of English at Clemson University. His research interests include African and African American Literature; Cultural Studies; Black writers and Narrative Studies.*