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Review paper

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**GENDER AND VIOLENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*,  
ELENA FERRANTE'S TETRALOGY *MY BRILLIANT FRIEND*,  
AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

This paper explores the portrayal of violence and gender in its relation to different historical periods, countries, cultures, and religions. The aim is to determine the role these different aspects have in forming of characters' identities and more specifically how it is all related to gender. The research will focus on Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Elena Ferrante's Tetralogy *My Brilliant Friend*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. All three novels, regardless of the different periods they fictionalize and discuss, and the literature they belong to, are connected by the captivating darkness that runs deeply through their fictional fiber and portrays the horrible conditions and struggles women have to go through because of the violence they were succumbed to, but also the violence they have to resort to to survive and even thrive in the ever-changing, but always firmly men's world. Morrison's novel is set in the early stages of the slave trade in America when racial, religious, and class tensions were just beginning to form, Ferrante's tetralogy focuses on the post-WWII Italy, poverty-stricken and violent neighborhoods of the outskirts of Naples, and *Purple Hibiscus* is set in postcolonial Nigeria, a country struggling with political instability and economic difficulties. All three authors with their respective novels render vibrant pictures of the lives of young girls and grown women, mothers, daughters, and friends, across times, countries, but also classes, that offer plenty of space for comparative research focusing on the presence and role of violence in their lives.

**Key words:** gender; violence; Morrison; Ferrante; Adichie

## INTRODUCTION

The matter of gender violence has become a very important field of study in literature and cultural studies, particularly with the emergence of the feminist movement in the twentieth century. Gender violence has been an everyday phenomenon in different societies and the factors such as patriarchy, culture, religion, and colonial education have contributed to violence and conflict. *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines violence as actions or words that are intended to hurt people; extreme force; and, extremely forceful actions that are intended to hurt people or are likely to cause damage.<sup>1</sup> The United Nations defines violence against women as „any act that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life“. (Article 1)<sup>2</sup> The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention mentions the following types of violence: psychological violence (Art. 33), stalking (Art. 34), physical violence (Art. 35), forced marriages (Art. 37), sexual violence, including rape (Art. 36), female genital mutilation (Art. 38), forced abortion and forced sterilization (Art. 39), sexual harassment (Art. 40), aiding or abetting and attempt (Art. 41), unacceptable justifications for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so-called honor (Art. 42).<sup>3</sup> On these bases, five types of violence can be differentiated: physical violence, verbal violence (including hate speech), psychological violence, sexual violence, socio-economic violence. There are also two other categories of violence: domestic violence and (sexual) harassment, both of which may be a combination of all five types of violence mentioned above. All of the mentioned types of violence are in some form and extent present in the three novels the paper focuses on. The main characters are girls coming of age. We follow them through their childhood and teenage years (in Ferrante as adult women as well). The themes in the novels are different, but they all reflect the patriarchal system of society, the violence of it, and how it affects women. Florens is violent, Elena isn't, but Lila is and Kambili isn't nor is her mother, but in the end, she is pushed towards violence and commits a crime, a violent act. It is also important to note that all novels start with explicit or implicit tone of violence: “Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done...” (Morrison 2008: 10), „This morning Rino tele-

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1. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/violence>

2. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>

3. Ibid.

phoned. I thought he wanted money again and I was ready to say no. But that was not the reason for the phone call: his mother was gone... My tone must have seemed hostile, even though I wasn't angry or offended; there was just a touch of sarcasm". (Ferrante 2011: 15), „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". (Adichie 2003: 6) Evidently, darkness and violence are set forth as important topics right from the opening pages of all three books and the authors stay on the course of depicting violent human nature throughout the novels.

### *A Mercy*

In her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison takes the readers into the world of pre-national and pre-racial America, into the world of the endless wilderness of the New Continent, when national and racial identities as feelings and notions were only beginning to emerge. In an interview with National Public Radio's Lynn Near Morrison says that she: „wanted to separate race from slavery to see what it was like, what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced; where your status was being enslaved but there was no application of racial inferiority”.<sup>4</sup> The plot of the novel points to the fact that slavery and racism in America hadn't been there from the start, from its colonial beginnings, but that it had, in fact, evolved by being “constructed, planted, institutionalized, and legalized”.<sup>5</sup> The position of women within such a significant historical period is another theme Morrison explores. Morrison's way of creating a fictional world of this nature is unique. With her novel, she seeks to credibly portray the social, cultural-historical sentiment of America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and recreate the suppressed, unwritten, marginalized ‘truth’ of historical events and the beginnings of what will become the U. S. The novel aims to deconstruct the grand narrative of America as a great nation of freedom and progress that has succeeded in suppressing the way it came to be. Moreover, Morrison embarks on a journey of rendering a vivid picture of an extremely common occurrence of violence that women faced in 17<sup>th</sup>-century America. Throughout the novel, readers see female characters that experience beatings and sexual violence that are not only condoned by the society but are even legally regulated.

The novel is set in colonial Virginia and Maryland, and Morrison uses the stream-of-consciousness approach to narrate the experiences of a wide range of early North

4. <https://audiobookhistory.wordpress.com/2013/07/29/talking-to-myself-an-interview-with-toni-morrison/>

5. Ibid.

American settlers. The novel addresses the issues of hybrid identity, as well as the functions of colonialism and religion in relation to the development of the system of slavery and the status of women. Given that the novel is set in 17th-century America, violence exists in most spheres of life, regardless of gender. Nonetheless, within the context of this article, it is crucial to consider how violence affects women in this context.

Morrison starts her novel with a tone implying violence: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark – weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more – but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth". (Morrison 2008: 10) The sentence initially portrays a stance of one being in power but also suggests that the speaker has committed a crime, an act of violence. The hurt is metaphorical, the telling of stories can't physically hurt the reader that she is addressing, but the violence itself here is shown as not only of physical nature but also contained in words/language. Telling stories can cause emotional harm and can therefore be seen as an act of violence. The speaker, however, immediately moves from that place of being in power to the place of a victim to the person having been hurt and still hurting. At the end of the sentence, she circles back to being a strong person, one that can attack and evokes animalistic references and comparisons, but vows never to act upon those instincts and drives. Morrison here describes Florens on a very primal level and implies all her actions stem from that place, but also summarizes what happens to her. Morrison wants to give her character power in a world where women were powerless. She wants Florens to be the one to tell her own story and not be the one whose story is told by a male narrator, character, or even a third-person narrator of an unknown gender. To be able to do so, she gives her the ultimate power, the power of words and literacy. Her literacy, which would be an oddity and rarity for those times, is explained right at the beginning by telling us the Father Reverend taught them reading and writing every week. There is a sad irony in the fact that Florens places emphasis on reading and comprehending signs and is unable to read or understand her mother "giving" her away and not her brother as an act of love and protection, but as the one of abandonment, emotional hurt and therefore in its essence violent. Her own hurt starts with being given away by her mother in Florens's eyes, but effectively her whole existence is embedded in the context of violence. She is born into slavery then separated/abandoned by/from her mother and traded to another man. Mother's act is actually the one that saves her from another act of violence, sexual abuse.

The language Morrison uses, the choice of words, motifs, and symbols is also one invoking darkness and violence. Rebekka's thoughts bled into one another for example.

Florens refers to her mother as *minhamae*, Portuguese for my mother, she uses the language she distanced herself from to distance her mother from herself, so it would be less hurtful. She also refers to her brother as her mother's boy. Her mother calls her dangerous and wild, but she sees dangers in her being wild and her "prettifying ways", wanting to know and understand. Florens wants to wear shoes, "The beginning begins with the shoes". Shoes represent a good and safe upbringing. Feet are physically hurt by one walking barefoot. Slaves were seen as animals and were supposed to walk barefoot like animals. Florens's resisting that kind of life is in itself rebellious hence dangerous.

In terms of physical violence, Florens harms others, she breaks Malaik's arm and is hit by the blacksmith whom she also hits with the tongs. As for the other characters in the novel, Rebekka observes that wife beating is "common" in colonial America even though Jacob does not strike her, but it is only permissible before nine at night and "with cause and not anger". Morrison damningly demonstrates how colonial society in the 17<sup>th</sup> century institutionalized, normalized, and sanctioned domestic violence against women by highlighting how it was "restricted". Moreover, it is important to note, that the law includes no protections for unmarried women, as Rebekka notes when she describes Lina's past trauma and most of the female characters in the novel are unmarried women. Lina goes through a horrible experience of being beaten and raped by her lover, which leaves her broken, traumatized, and uninterested in sex. Lina, however, is not the only person in the book to have experienced sexual assault; Florens' mother and Sorrow have both been raped and are also without any protection from such assault because of their color and gender. Sorrow's first pregnancy occurs while she is just a young adolescent, proving that whatever intercourse she had as a young girl was not consenting. Morrison nits the web of her female characters' lives closely and carefully to show the burdensome lives of women of that period, but makes sure to point out that it was indeed more difficult for women of color.

The prevalence of violence against women in the novel may be attributable to the position women held in society during the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the colonies, when the majority of American women were seen as the property of white males, either as slaves, indentured servants, or wives. Black or native women who were enslaved were particularly at risk for brutality and assault. Even white, free women, who experience far less brutality than black women under slavery, are portrayed as being valuable commodities to be traded. For instance, when her father sends Rebekka away in exchange for money, she marries Jacob. Rebekka's father plainly views this as an opportunity to use his daughter as a pawn in a business deal even if the money is supposed to pay for her trip. Women who are unattached to males, such as widows

and single mothers, are marginalized by society in 17th-century America because they are seen as the property of men.

Morrison demonstrates how all the female characters in the book are vulnerable to abuse and discrimination because of their gender. When Florens' mother says, "I don't know who your father is. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed... To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (143), she sums up Morrison's portrayal of female suffering. Even if scars appear, the infection persists behind. In other words, trauma, oppression, and its inescapable, long-lasting impacts define females in early colonial America. The bonds the women in the book form with other women who have experienced similar trauma give them comfort, even though the violence they experience hurts them. Rebekka, for instance, makes friends with a group of women from various socioeconomic classes aboard the ferry from Europe (including prostitutes and disgraced middle-class women). Together, the women address their constraints as women, their lives with men, sex, and the impact of the commodity of women's bodies. Rebekka and Lina have a tight bond despite their different races, which gives Lina a safe place to communicate about her past trauma. Rebekka believes that Sorrow's failure to develop strong female relationships in the book is a result of not being raised by women as a youngster, Sorrow was trained to pursue male attention. While the pain, violence, and oppression of gender burden the female characters in the work, Morrison demonstrates how these heartbreaks are dealt with by the women by establishing supportive ties outside of the masculine world.

### ***My Brilliant Friend***

There are plenty of words that come to mind concerning Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*, beautiful, passionate, natural, brazen, an array of themes and motifs as well, friendship, women, community, post-WWII Italy, but also violence, and the one word we would associate with violence in her novels is its omnipresence. In contrast to the novel *A Mercy*, slavery and human trafficking are not present, but the sheer physical violence, in its most brutal form, pervades all parts of the novel and the lives of the protagonists and all other characters. The book is set in an impoverished Naples neighborhood in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s, so the time frame of the novel hints at a greater presence, but also the acceptance and legality of male violence against women. Men from Lena's and Lila's environment commit various violent acts, and their reasons are inexhaustible; from revenge, fighting for their wives or

sisters in defense of their honor, debt-settling altercations, and extortion to forbidding further education for their female children. Ferrante, however, does not aim to portray only male violence, she shows the readers in a very careful and methodical way how this continuous world of raw male violence imprints itself on the very core of the community and also affects and transforms the community of women and children and turns their life and community into a hellish world of everyday violence that they don't even notice – women fight with women, and women beat children, both their own and other people's and shouting, rudeness and bigotry are part of everyday discourse and constitute the main element of the very fabric of their existence. Ferrante wants to make it apparent that even in a society where men are more likely to use physical force, women and children often act out the same violence. Physical violence and emotional cruelty are primarily initiated by men in their families, first as sons, then as husbands and fathers, and are transmitted to the entire family as a whole and in the end community. Furthermore, children become cruel and violent towards each other and repeat all kinds of violence committed by adults, from beatings to psychological abuse, verbal abuse, and threats. The importance of the community and dynamics between families in it is clear from the very beginning of the novel – each novel in the tetralogy is preceded by the detailed introduction of the central families and their respective members, so it is safe to say that Ferrante wants to make sure that interconnectedness of the violence throughout the segments of the community is not lost on the readers. Two main characters, Lila and Lenù experience physical assaults from both men and women while witnessing violence and even murder, and though they share a beautiful and strong friendship, it is also one suffused with cruelty, betrayal, envy and to least say with competition.

The violence in *My Brilliant Friend* is a way of life – it governs how neighbors interact with one another, assist one another out when they're in need, raise their children, run their companies, and create or shatter plans. By juxtaposing the violence committed by men, usually in the name of honor or retaliation, with the violence committed by women, sometimes physical, but just as frequently emotional, Ferrante shows how violence is a taught response that is replicated and disseminated throughout an entire community. Toxic masculinity and sexism are the origins of much of the novel's tension, but as women take on the violent behaviors they witness men engaging in daily, they confirm that violence serves as an unsatisfactory tool not only for men but also for women who are fighting to be seen, heard, and respected.

Elena develops an atmosphere of dread, escalation, and terrible but unspoken power dynamics by connecting the tale of ascending the stairs to Don Achille's apartment with other scenes of daily life in the area of her upbringing. She demonstrates

that even at a considerable personal sacrifice to herself, as a little girl, she was prepared to follow Lila into unimaginable situations. The frightening nature of the unwritten laws in Lila and Lenù's area is made abundantly plain in this section. The girls have been indoctrinated to fear Don Achille, but they are unaware that their parents fear him in a sense that is much more realistic than the "ogre" or golem-like visions that the kids have conjured up in their imaginations since he controls the neighborhood's financial ins and outs. From this point on, every little experience Lila and Lenù have had together has been flavored with violence and dread, whether it was a rock war with Enzo and the other boys, a climb into the cellar, or a confrontation with Don Achille. The first independent decision they make about themselves, and their freedom is skipping school, but there is still an underlying sense of unease and dread that they feel about it, and the way the whole adventure ends shows how unprepared they are for the world that is yet to be taken on.

The first sentence in the novel opens with a sense of danger and mystery, but also with an air of animosity: "This morning Rino telephoned. I thought he wanted money again and I was ready to say no. But that was not the reason for the phone call: his mother was gone". (Ferrante 2011: 1) Elena here is not violent towards Rino, but the permeating violence that readers witness throughout the novel, thus throughout the course of the lives of its characters is also shown in this very first sentence, and more importantly it shows the readers the subtle potential of the violence of language and discourse. Elena, who is a writer like Ferrante, lives and breathes the words, and her power in this respect is presented to the readers right from the beginning: "My tone must have seemed hostile, even though I wasn't angry or offended; there was just a touch of sarcasm. He tried to respond but he did so in an awkward, muddled way, half in dialect, half in Italian". (Ibid.) The position of power via language is here clear and is reverse to what it would be if the power was drawn from physical strength, in the context of gender. Ferrante is precise in her adumbration of the power of language, intellect, but also education for women, so that it does seem as the only way to counteract the well-established societal and systemic power of men. However, she does seem to imply that an assertive if not aggressive linguistic approach is at times a recourse or even a strategy in the ongoing endeavor of changing and improving the position of women in society, and the opening chapter does end on that note since Elena finishes her conversation with Rino in the same tone telling him not to call her and hanging up on him. The roughness and terseness of the tone of Naples's suburb that the readers see as a characteristic of almost every character in the novel except for Lenu's is here evident and stands as proof that is also inescapable.

Another element of volatility that the novel opens with is the actual disappearance of Lila. A disappearance is an act or the fact of someone or something going missing or the process of something ceasing to exist or be in use which in itself implies danger, mystery, and violence. Lila vanishes without a trace and even eliminates all traces of her existence. Her clothes are gone, her computer, birth certificates, telephone bills, and receipts, she even cuts herself out of all the photographs even those with Rino and those when he was little, as Rino puts it, implying perhaps when he was not a source of worry and disappointment for his mother. Elena reflects upon the whole event after talking to Rino:

“Lila is overdoing it as usual, I thought. She was expanding the concept of trace out of all proportion. She wanted not only to disappear herself, now, at the age of sixty-six, but also to eliminate the entire life that she had left behind. I was really angry. We’ll see who wins this time, I said to myself. I turned on the computer and began to write – all the details of our story, everything that still remained in my memory.” (Ibid. 18)

Elena is angered by Lila’s act of disappearance and that feeling is what inspires or rather fuses the storytelling act. The act of novel writing starts here, starts out of anger, competition, and out of spite, but also love, and Ferrante doesn’t want the readers to miss that fact.

Ferrante also plays with the metaphor of light and darkness, good and evil, love and anger. Elena’s efforts to put light on Lila’s, but also on her own life, are juxtaposed with the inherent darkness that surrounds the context of their living and of their relationship. In the context of traditional literature, love is light, anger is dark, and it is precisely out of the entanglement of these two feelings that the novel writing starts. Lila and Lenu love each other, but are also angry at each other, jealous and envious. The word dark appears 225 times in the tetralogy, including the words darkness and darkened. The word black also appears 148 times. The very description of their friendship starts with the two of them going up the dark stairs to the apartment of Don Achille, who is the dark presence in their lives and the lives of their parents: “My friendship with Lila began the day we decided to go up the dark stairs that led, step after step, flight after flight, to the door of Don Achille’s apartment”. (21) The sentence is also a metaphor or even a summary of their friendship and lives, the flights and steps are their efforts and tenacity while Don Achille is a symbol of the problems that they need to face and solve. However, quite wittingly Ferrante names them the names of light – Elena, a name of Greek origin meaning literally ‘shining light’, and Raffaella, the name of the archangel from the Old Testament, meaning ‘god heals’.

The word light, for the sake of comparison, appears 137 times in the book, and the word white 116 times, which perhaps speaks of Ferrante's intention to put forth this struggle between good and evil, but also darkness, thus violence as the underlying tone and theme in the novel and the obstacles the girls, women have to go against. They quite obviously have to fight through life against very dark moments and the violence of this very premise should not be lost on the readers.

The most brutal form of violence shown in their childhood is the act of throwing Lila out of the window of their family apartment which her father does in a fit of anger over Lila's wish to continue her education. Lila's persistence is driven by the wish to compete with Lenu and the spiteful vowing she would get into middle school even though she missed the admission tests so she threw insults at her father worse than usual.

"Often, as I waited for her to come down to the courtyard, I heard her shouting from the windows. She hurled insults in the worst street dialect, so vulgar that listening to them made me think of order and respect; it didn't seem right to treat adults like that or even her brother. Of course, her father, Fernando the shoemaker, when he lost his head turned ugly. But all fathers had fits of anger. And hers, when she didn't provoke him, was a kind, sympathetic man, a hard worker." (71)

The effect of this instant is twofold, it shows Lila's almost mad-like persistence, her violent nature, but also the sad appreciation of men who are kind when not provoked. Being a child, Lila's only way of fighting is her words, and given the lack of education and refinement, built-up anger, they are vulgar. She is presented as a character who establishes relations with people by being her truest but also her ugliest self and by pushing them to their limits. "Suddenly the shouting stopped and a few seconds later my friend flew out the window, passed over my head, and landed on the asphalt behind me." Lenu is stunned at Fernando throwing her like a thing and still yelling at her from the window. She looks "at her terrified while she tried to get up and said, with an almost amused grimace, "I haven't hurt myself." But she was bleeding; she had broken her arm". (72) This moment sums up Lila's character thus far, but it also affects and changes her, and tells us that, unlike Lenu, she has a whole world and herself to fight up against.

Lenu intuitively feels the presence of violence in her neighborhood and describes it as a malicious inescapable force encompassing everyone and everything.

"I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence. Every sort of thing happened, at home and outside, every day, but I don't recall having ever thought that the life we had there

was particularly bad. Life was like that, that's all, we grew up with the duty to make it difficult for others before they made it difficult for us. Of course, I would have liked the nice manners that the teacher and the priest preached, but I felt that those ways were not suited to our neighborhood, even if you were a girl. The women fought among themselves more than the men, they pulled each other's hair, and they hurt each other. To cause pain was a disease. As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night, they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embankment, from the stinking grasses called fetienti, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs. They were more severely infected than the men, because while men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women, who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end." (30)

Elena describes their childhood as being a disease-ridden existence. No one seems to see the constant need to cause each other pain as anything out of the ordinary, it is simply a way of existence, except for Lenu. Ferrante portrays the point of view of an observant and intuitive child and gives the readers an insight into how this violent world looks and imprints itself on a child. Ferrante moves from Elena's point of view as an adult to her younger point of view to describe with precision the intuitive perception and visualization of the presence of violence at a young age. It is only fitting that the animal symbolism is unspecified. One lurking beast would not suffice in describing the violent darkness in people of their world, it would be too isolated, unexpected, and sudden when Ferrante wants to present it as something present and pulsating in everyone and the community as a whole. She does not name the animals, but Lenu imagines them as tiny and invisible, ingestible, omnipresent, and as beings that make an integral part of all of them. Ferrante however does state in the end, that female rage had no end, and it is this unbroken cycle of feminine innate anger that she wants to delineate and explore in the novel.

As we see Lila and Lenù growing up, we also see how the violence in their neighborhood changes, becomes more present, more serious, and begins to affect them more directly. As children and later adolescent girls, they are surrounded by men of all ages who have learned that using violence to solve problems is the best course of action. These men include their parents, Don Achille, Solaras, and even their friends Antonio, Enzo, and Pasquale. The girls witness all sorts of violence, ultimately, becoming violent themselves to a varying extent. Lila, for instance, constantly carries a knife and is also cruel to Lenù most of the time which is a learned behavior. The

girls admire each other, but they are also constantly jealous of each other, and the intertwining of these feelings, which forces them into constant mutual competition, becomes the basic element of their relationship. Lenu thinks to herself that Lila is malicious, but also feels that now that they are becoming women, Lila is about to release something more vicious. So, it is womanhood that is in Lenu's eyes synonymous with viciousness and she realizes it is a dark and malicious path they are headed for as adults.

### ***Purple Hibiscus***

Chimamanda Adichie is a prominent feminist activist, and she often addresses the issue of gender violence and focuses on domestic violence. *Purple Hibiscus* which she wrote when she was just 25 is her first book and is an example of a novel about women, women's struggles and sufferings, but also their resilience and perseverance. The novel is an example of gender violence as well as domestic violence stemming from religious fanaticism and cultural norms. In this novel, Adichie portrays the various tortures her characters received for trivial reasons. She presents the impact of religious fanaticism on family relations and how education and knowledge are pivotal in empowerment and enlightenment.

Adichie tackles gender violence from different perspectives, particularly the religious one. Most of the violence that happens in the novel occurs within the family and in one household and is done in the name of religion, by the fanatic father. The nuclear family in the novel is Achike family, which is made up of Eugene Achike, his wife Beatrice, and their children Jaja and Kambili. Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, and her children, as well as Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene's father, make up the extended family. Sisi, the housekeeper, Kevin, the driver, and the gardener have all been incorporated into the family as a result of their employment. Adichie depicts in graphic detail the struggles of this family, a typical African family with a history of abuse and domestic violence. Adichie in addition, reveals that religion is being utilized to justify violence and oppression. The final act of violence, the murder, however, happens not out of religious zest but because of it and as a form of self-defense. Beatrice doesn't see another way out, precisely because of cultural norms, expectations, and economic reasons. The process of reasoning behind this act is left out in the novel and the readers are to see it by themselves. With this kind of ending of violence, by violence itself, Adichie reiterates the idea of violence being a vicious circle where violence begets violence.

Like Morrison and Ferrante, Adichie also starts with providing the readers with the picture of violence in society. She wishes to portray the cycle of violence in Nigerian society, the governmental and political violence, and the violence that occurs within families. British colonialism's persecution was the first source of violence, which later resulted in corruption and hostility in the Nigerian administrations that were established as a result. There is a sense of constant lurking danger in the novel, with regards to government and domestic lives. Ade Coker and the pro-democracy campaigner Nwanketi Ogechi are killed by the military government of the Head of State, and Ifeoma's apartment is ransacked, Eugene beats, lashes out on his family, even resorts to pouring boiling water on his daughter in order to impose his own type of oppression on them. Much like the oppressive government, Eugene imposes strict rules that are to be followed in his family. These rules and punishments stemming from breaking them are not self-invented, they are rooted in religion or have to do with religion in some way, but Eugene's maniacal nature pushes them to extremes. He flogs his wife for giving Kambili food before mass which she does so before giving her Panadol to relieve the menstrual cramps.

"Papa's white shirt, with its perfectly tailored lines, did little to minimize the mound of flesh that was his stomach. While he stared at the glass bowl of corn flakes in my hand, I looked down at the few flaccid flakes floating among the clumps of milk and wondered how he had climbed the stairs so soundlessly.

"What are you doing, Kambili?"

I swallowed hard. "I...I..."

"You are eating ten minutes before Mass? Ten minutes before Mass?"

"Her period started and she has cramps" — Mama said.

Jaja cut her short. "I told her to eat corn flakes before she took Panadol, Papa. I made it for her."

"Has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him?" The Igbo words burst out of Papa's mouth. "Has the devil built a tent in my house?" He turned to Mama. "You sit there and watch her desecrate the Eucharistic fast, makannidi?"

He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back."(76)

The reasoning behind Beatrice's permission is not good enough for Eugene because it is a sin to eat food one hour before mass: "The Eucharist fast mandated that

the faithful not eat solid food an hour before Mass". (Adichie 76) The frightening dynamics of the violence in the family are portrayed quite graphically in this paragraph. The father sneaks up on them with omnipresent-like abilities, much like the God or the regime government would, and finds them in an otherwise normal moment, but in his eyes committing a sin in which they are all equally guilty. The mother and children do not protest, they do not yell, and they accept the punishment silently. The father lands his blows on children where it wouldn't be seen and the mother offers for beating that same, easily hidden, part of her body by herself. It all seems rhythmical, accepted, and performed because of the repetitive nature of the moment – they have all lived through it many times before. Learned and permitted violence in society and one endorsed by religious scripts becomes a way of life.

The attempt to avoid violence subsequently results in further violence in the same way it happens in *My Brilliant Friend*. Similar to how colonialism led to a corrupt autonomous government, the aggression of the father forces the mother to poison and kill him. As a result, Adichie, like Ferrante, demonstrates that using violence as a tool of oppression or in the pursuit of liberation nearly invariably results in more violence. In *Purple Hibiscus*, domestic violence is the most common form of gender abuse. Beatrice experiences this abuse at the hands of her husband and bears it in silence because she is afraid of the stigma and consequences of divorce which is never considered in the novel and even tries to justify her husband's behavior by ascribing his violent behavior to stress by political situation in the country as well.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, domestic abuse is present in the form of either physical, psychological, or emotional violence and it does seem to be more disturbing in its nature when compared to *A Mercy* and *My Brilliant Friend* because of its rootedness in religion, its fanatic nature, and the presence of certain eerie calmness about it. Eugene succumbs his family to actual physical brutality by way of kicking, beating, flogging, slapping, and even burning parts of body. Psychological violence, however, is characterized by persistent fear, anxiety, and depression that either the mother or the children feel, and emotional and mental violence is reflected in oppression, repression, abuses, and assaults. These different types of violence are all rooted in colonialism, cultural norms, and religious fanaticism. The domestic violence depicted in the book is at times done so vividly, explicitly, as in the previously cited paragraph, or in the scene where Kambili has boiling water poured over her feet in the bath, at other times it is presented silently, through the omission of sounds and descriptions, as in the scene where Kambili blacks out as Eugene kicks her while she is on the ground, and at other times using auditory images, the most striking of which is the thudding on the walls of the parent's room.

In most societies and varying in extent, women are typically marginalized, oppressed, and treated unfairly in one or more ways, but more importantly, they are also historically referred to as defective and impure in different contexts. Many of these egregious mistreatments and atrocities are the result of perceptions and interpretations of religious teachings and can be traced back to religious texts. Religion has been used for patriarchal ends since its beginnings and it has been a successful tool in achieving men's supremacy over women. In religious context men are taught to exert power over women and women are in turn taught to be submissive and obedient which is to say that ideology plays a significant role in keeping the status quo between genders. For this reason, Adichie approaches the problems of Eugene's family and the lack of their resistance to him despite all the horrors they endure from an ideological standpoint. The father has all the power because he uses ideological power to manipulate them into obedience. Jaja is the first to see this which is why he refuses to go to church – he questions the authority of religion to question and dismantle the authority of the father. Adichie starts the novel by alluding to Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart* to precisely point to deconstructing and demystifying of the authorities and oppressiveness: "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". (Adichie 1) The sentence can sum up the beginning of any form of resistance – one starts questioning and standing up to the nearest authority, one they are directly governed by and submitted to by refusing to adhere to simple rules of a larger authority that is used as a means of control and holds the absolute power. Eugene's power is drawn from the fact that he is a man in a patricentric society, a devout Catholic in a highly religious country, and a philanthropist in a high poverty rate country. For those same reasons, his family is unable to stand up to him – mother would be shamed by the divorce, children as well, and they would be left in father's care because for the outside world Eugene is good, pious, and modest:

"Papa always sat in the front pew for mass, at the end beside the middle aisle, with Mama, Jaja and me sitting next to him. He was first to receive communion. Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar... but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace..." (Adichie 6)

Eugene is highly respected by the pastor and members of the St. Agnes Catholic Church, where he frequently worships with his family. Father Benedict often mentions him in his sermons, lauded as a role model to be emulated and revered. Eugene is a

philanthropist who donates to the church and the local community, earning him the title of “The One Who Does for the Community”. Eugene is also a human rights activist who utilizes “The Standard”, his publication, as a weapon in his campaign to expose, contest, and denounce the wrongs of the government which earns him an award from Amnesty World. In contrast to this public persona, the Eugene Achike readers see at home, within the private and intimate world of his own family, is a violent, abusive husband, father, brother, and son, who holds his family hostage to his vicious forms of abuse.

The opening paragraph presents the dual personality of the father, the Christian, and the violent abuser, but it also demonstrates the psychological and spiritual damage that a child’s mind endures under the circumstances of domestic abuse and how it changes it because Jaja would rather be dead than continue living in constant fear. Spiritual abuse, which is a form of psychological and emotional abuse manifests in Jaja’s open defiance of his father through his refusal to receive communion in church. Eugene sees as sacrilege Jaja’s reference to the ‘host’ as ‘wafer’ and the touch of the priest as ‘nauseating’.

“The wafer gives me bad breath.” (...) “And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me,” Jaja said. He knew I was looking at him, that my shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth, but he did not look at me.

“It is the body of our Lord.” Papa’s voice was low, very low. His face looked swollen already, with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch, but it seemed to be swelling even more. “You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that.”

“Then I will die.” Fear had darkened Jaja’s eyes to the color of coal tar, but he looked Papa in the face now. “Then I will die, Papa.” (Adichie 8)

This first instant of Jaja’s rebellion against religion and his father infuriates Eugene, propels his violence, and even worse, because of its religious context, it offers him absolution after each atrocity he commits. Regardless of the fear, to Jaja, death is obviously preferable to his father’s harshness and hypocrisy. This reaction serves as the catalyst for Jaja’s determination to defend his mother and siblings from his father’s misdeeds despite the negative consequences. The world of their family does start falling apart in this moment. Even though Jaja is missed by the missal and unharmed, the figurines which serve as an outlet for Beatrice’s pain are broken: “I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard sounds from their room like

something banged against the door. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face". (Adichie 10). Beatrice uses figurines to deal with her pain, it is a form of soothing activity that suppresses the trauma and creates a protective barrier between her and the life she is living and the resolution to not replace them is indicative of change in her as well as it is in Jaja.

Beatrice sees herself as a woman through wifedom and motherhood and she suppresses the fact that by continuing to be the good wife, she is, in fact, being a bad mother. In spite of Eugene being the cause of her bodily, emotional, and spiritual suffering, she chooses to stay with him. Unlike Lila, who eventually leaves all the men harming her in any way or Lenu who leaves both Pietro and Nino, though for different reasons, Beatrice believes she is forced to stay with her husband because of things like the stigma associated with divorce, the stability of the children, financial security, her religious convictions, and social expectations. She does this while stoically tolerating his brutality and enduring it while her scarred and disfigured children serve as the silent witnesses to and victims of his extreme violence.

Beatrice only briefly leaves her husband once, when he beats her while being pregnant to the point of miscarriage, and when she returns, she has excuses for him: "He is carrying more than any man should carry. Do you know what Ade's death did to him? It is too much for one person". (Adichie 250). She accepts her condition and the position of a subjugated victim. Unlike the female characters in *A Mercy* and *My Brilliant Friend* who each in different ways and to a varying extent fight back, Beatrice is silent and submissive throughout her marriage, but in the end, she is the one who resorts to the most violent act there is, a murder. Ironically enough, but in line with Beatrice's circumstances and character, the murder itself isn't perpetrated in a violent manner, but in a silent one because she chooses to poison her husband.

## CONCLUSION

All three authors build fictional worlds based on real-life circumstances and societies. The novels contain and depict violence in the societies as a whole: colonial America, 1950s and 1960s Italy, especially the south of Italy, and 1980s Nigeria with its colonial past and military coup happening when the events in the novel are taking place. Historical periods the novels are set in, but cultural and religious contexts, as well, enormously affect the presence of violence in general, but especially violence towards women. *A Mercy* contains violence in the form of slavery, beatings, rapes, but it is not graphically portrayed as it is in *My Brilliant Friend* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Physical

violence is represented in all three novels. The physical beating of children by the parent(s) is most striking and upsetting in *Purple Hibiscus* as a constant form of abuse but is as equally present in *My Brilliant Friend*, the moment of Lila being thrown through the window, being the most striking scene and grown Elena being slapped by her mother, perhaps another one even though Elena at that point is not a child. However, physical violence, the omnipresence of it in all aspects of life is most present in *My Brilliant Friend*. There is domestic violence in all three novels, but the most considerable attention to it is given in *Purple Hibiscus*. All the violence in the novels is in a way rooted or connected to religion. In 17<sup>th</sup> century America, post-WWII Italy and 1980s Nigeria, but again the issue is most present in the *Purple Hibiscus*. Rape is most prominently represented in *A Mercy* in a manner that the main character herself is the product of rape and is abandoned by the mother because of the possibility of her actual father raping her as well. Sorrow and Lina are survivors of rape as well. Statutory rape is most controversially described in *My Brilliant Friend* and spousal rape most explicitly as well. Gender violence affects and shapes the identities of all main characters in the novels. Female characters are abused, but they also resort to violence themselves as a response to the circumstances in their lives.

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## **SPOL I NASILJE U *MILOSTI* TONI MORRISON, TETRALOGIJI *MOJA GENIJALNA PRIJATELJICA* ELENE FERRANTE I *PURPURNI HIBISKUS* CHIMAMANDE NGOZI ADICHIE**

### **Sažetak**

Rad istražuje načine predstavljanja nasilja i spola, a u kontekstu različitih historijskih razdoblja, kao i zemlja, kultura i religija. Cilj je utvrditi značaj različitih aspektata u formiranju identiteta likova te, preciznije, njihovu povezanost sa spolom. Istraživanje je usredotočeno na djela: *Milost* Toni Morrison, tetralogiju *Moja genijalna prijateljica* Elene Ferrante i *Purpurni hibiskus* Chimamande Ngozi Adichie. Sva tri romana, bez obzira na različita razdoblja fikcionaliziranja i različite književnosti kojim pripadaju povezana su impresionirajućom tamom koja se prožima kroz njihovu srž i reflektuje užasne tegobe i borbe koje žene proživljavaju zbog nasilja kojem su podvrgnute, ali i nasilja kojem moraju pribjeći da bi preživjele i opstale, pa čak i napredovale u stalno promjenjivom, ali zasigurno muškom svijetu. Radnja Morrisonina roman odvija se u ranim fazama trgovine robovima u Americi, u vremenu začetka rasnih, vjerskih i klasnih napetosti; Ferranteina tetralogija usredotočila se na Italiju nakon Drugog svjetskog rata, na vrijeme siromaštva i prostore nasilnih četvrti Napulja, dok *Purpurni hibiskus* tematizira postkolonijalnu Nigeriju, zemlju koja se bori s političkom nestabilnošću i ekonomskim poteškoćama. Sve tri autorice u svojim romanima vješto donose živopisne slike o životima mladih djevojaka i odraslih žena, majki, kćeri i prijatelja, provodeći nas kroz vrijeme, različite zemlje, ali i staleže, nudeći obilje materijala za komparativno istraživanje usredotočeno na prisutnost i ulogu nasilja u njihovim životima.

**Ključne riječi:** spol; nasilje; Morrison; Ferrante; Adichie

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