

Silence and Female Subjectivity: Reading Purple Hibiscus in Relation to Women's Cultural Condition in Tangkhul Society

M. Wonshimpam

English Lecturer, Kamjong Higher Secondary School, Kamjong District, Manipur- 795145

Abstract

Silence has often been understood within feminist discourse as a sign of women's marginalisation and oppression. However, silence also functions as a culturally embedded strategy through which women negotiate authority, endurance, and identity. This paper examines female silence and subjectivity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in relation to the cultural condition of women in Tangkhul society. Through a feminist and postcolonial reading, the paper analyses how silence operates both as a mechanism of patriarchal control and as a space for emotional survival and gradual resistance. By placing the experiences of Kambili and Beatrice alongside Tangkhul women's culturally sanctioned silence, the study offers a comparative local–global perspective that redefines silence as a formative dimension of female subjectivity rather than mere voicelessness.

Keywords: Silence, Female Subjectivity, Purple Hibiscus, Tangkhul Women, Feminist Criticism, Indigenous Culture

1. Introduction

Feminist literary studies have long examined how women's voices are shaped, restricted, or suppressed within patriarchal social structures. Across cultures, silence has been imposed on women as a moral discipline that governs speech, behaviour, and emotional expression. Rather than functioning merely as an absence of voice, silence often reflects culturally sanctioned endurance, obedience, and emotional restraint. Feminist scholars have increasingly argued that silence must be read as a complex social and psychological condition rather than a simple marker of passivity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* offers a powerful literary representation of female silence within a rigidly patriarchal and religious household in postcolonial Nigeria. Through the characters of Kambili and her mother Beatrice, the novel exposes how authoritarian power, religious extremism, and domestic violence restrict female expression. Yet the text also reveals how silence shapes inner consciousness, memory, and identity, eventually enabling self-awareness and resistance.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, silence is not only externally imposed through violence and fear but also internalised as a moral virtue. Kambili's habitual quietness, stammered speech, and fear of articulation demonstrate how silence becomes a survival strategy within an oppressive domestic space. Similarly, Beatrice's long endurance of abuse reflects a culturally familiar pattern in which women absorb suffering to preserve family stability and social respectability. These representations closely resonate with the lived realities of women in Tangkhul society, where silence is traditionally associated with respect, discipline, and moral strength within familial and communal structures.

By placing *Purple Hibiscus* in dialogue with Tangkhul women's cultural condition, this paper explores silence as a culturally nuanced yet universally gendered phenomenon. It argues that silence plays a crucial role in the

formation of female subjectivity, shaping women's emotional worlds before they can articulate resistance or agency.

2. Silence, Gender, and Feminist Theory

Feminist theory has consistently drawn attention to the ways women's silence is socially produced. Simone de Beauvoir's concept of woman as the "Other" highlights how patriarchal societies define women in relation to male authority, thereby limiting their autonomy and voice. Elaine Showalter's feminist literary framework further emphasises the importance of recovering women's experiences that are muted within dominant literary traditions.

Silence, within feminist criticism, has often been interpreted as evidence of exclusion from power. However, recent feminist readings complicate this understanding by recognising silence as a space of psychological negotiation. Women may remain silent not because they lack thought or emotion, but because silence ensures survival within hostile structures. Thus, silence becomes both a sign of oppression and a strategy of endurance.

This theoretical framework is particularly useful for reading *Purple Hibiscus* alongside Tangkhul women's cultural experiences. In both contexts, silence is taught, internalised, and rewarded, making it a deeply gendered cultural practice.

3. Silence and Domestic Authority in *Purple Hibiscus*

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike's authority dominates both the domestic and spiritual spheres. His religious fanaticism legitimises violence and enforces silence, especially upon women. Kambili's silence is marked by fear—fear of punishment, fear of speech, and fear of emotional expression. Her voice is conditioned to remain subdued, reflecting the internalisation of patriarchal discipline.

Beatrice's silence operates differently but with equal significance. Despite enduring repeated physical and emotional abuse, she rarely speaks against her husband. Her silence is interpreted by society as patience and virtue, reinforcing the expectation that women should endure suffering for the sake of family unity. This prolonged silence, however, accumulates psychological trauma, ultimately leading to an act of resistance that disrupts patriarchal authority.

Thus, silence in *Purple Hibiscus* is not static. It evolves from submission to awareness, revealing how female subjectivity develops internally long before it manifests outwardly.

4. Women's Cultural Condition and Silence in Tangkhul Society

In Tangkhul society, women are traditionally socialised into silence from an early age. Silence is associated with respect for elders, obedience to male authority, and emotional self-control. Speaking openly, particularly against family or marital authority, is often discouraged, as it is seen to threaten social harmony.

Women's endurance of suffering—whether emotional, domestic, or social—is culturally valorised. Silence, therefore, becomes a means of preserving family honour and communal stability. However, this silence frequently conceals emotional labour, suppressed agency, and inner resilience. Like Beatrice, Tangkhul women often absorb pain privately, and like Kambili, younger women learn restraint as a moral discipline.

Importantly, silence in Tangkhul society does not necessarily indicate acceptance. Instead, it often masks unspoken resistance, negotiation, and self-awareness, aligning closely with feminist interpretations of silence as a complex cultural practice.

5. Comparative Analysis: Literature and Indigenous Experience

The parallels between *Purple Hibiscus* and Tangkhul women's cultural condition reveal silence as a shared gendered experience across distinct cultural contexts. In both, women are trained to value silence as virtue, while speech is associated with rebellion or moral failure. Yet silence also becomes the space where female subjectivity is formed.

Kambili's transformation illustrates how internal silence fosters self-reflection and emotional awakening before speech becomes possible. Similarly, Tangkhul women's silence often precedes subtle forms of resistance, negotiation, and identity formation. This comparative reading challenges Western feminist assumptions that equate empowerment solely with vocal expression.

By foregrounding indigenous cultural experience, the study broadens feminist literary criticism and asserts that women's subjectivity may emerge quietly, gradually, and culturally rather than through immediate verbal defiance.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined silence as a culturally embedded and gendered phenomenon in *Purple Hibiscus* and Tangkhul society. It has argued that silence functions not only as an instrument of patriarchal control but also as a strategy of emotional survival and a formative space for female subjectivity. Through a comparative local–global perspective, the study demonstrates that women's silence contains psychological depth, resilience, and the potential for resistance.

By reading Adichie's novel alongside Tangkhul women's lived realities, the paper contributes an original indigenous perspective to feminist literary studies. It ultimately establishes that silence is not marginal to women's identity but central to the slow, complex process through which female subjectivity is shaped and expressed.

References

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