

Judith Herman's Trauma Theory and the issues of reconstruction of identity after trauma as seen in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Trauma has become an important area of research in modern literary studies, especially in connection with trauma narratives involving the intersections of violence, memory and identity formation. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's work offers a fascinating examination of the psychological trauma that can occur in the home, when the patriarchy, religion and emotional violence leave a mark on people's minds. This study examines the reconstruction of identity in the novel from a theoretical perspective of Judith Herman's trauma theory. Herman's trauma recovery model, which consists of three phases: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection, offers a broad overview that could be used to look at the psychological change in Kambili Achike. The paper contends that memory is not just a record of traumas, but an active process that helps to rebuild one's sense of self and regain one's agency. Moreover, the research illustrates the steps taken by a feminist empowerment of the protagonist, starting with a resistance against patriarchal domination, until he created his own identity. The research reveals that Adichie's writing offers a picture of trauma recovery as a complex process that includes the negotiation of memory, the recovery of voice, and the claim of female subjectivity. In conclusion, the novel highlights the potential for healing and empowerment in oppressive social systems and thus enriches the conversation of the book about trauma, gender and postcolonial identity.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Identity Reconstruction, Feminist Empowerment, Judith Herman, *Purple Hibiscus*, Postcolonial Literature

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Introduction

The socio-political context is reflected in contemporary African literature in which questions of identity, oppression, and resistance are regularly explored, as these have been the experiences of individual and collective African lives. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is one of the leading figures in this tradition for her sophisticated examination of gender, power and cultural change. In *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) the psychological effects of domestic violence and religious authoritarianism are explored through the Achike family's experiences. The story is mostly about Kambili Achike, a 15-year-old girl whose life is ruled by her father Eugene's extreme religious beliefs and harsh punishments. Kambili grows up in a world of fear and silence, creating a sense of disintegration. Her state of mind is an indication of the effects of trauma more generally, where the victim's ability to have independent self-expression is compromised. The field of trauma studies gives us insights in how such

experiences are represented, notably those of Judith Herman. For Herman, trauma involves a rupture of identity and relationships with others and the significance of memory for trauma recovery. Her framework emphasizes survivors' processes of self-reconstruction in relation to trauma acknowledgment and reclaiming agency. This is a study that focuses on the role of memory in the reconstruction of identity in *Purple Hibiscus* and the final product of that process – the empowerment of the feminist. It claims that Kambili's transformation from silence to self-expression is an example of Herman's trauma healing model, and that it shows that Adichie is dedicated to portraying women's strength in a male-dominated society. In this study, psychological trauma was explored in *Purple Hibiscus* and memory was analyzed in relation to identity reconstruction. The study also employed Judith Herman's theory of trauma and examined how Kambili's trajectory of development was impacted by trauma and the link between trauma recovery and

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women's empowerment. The study examines Adichie's critique of the authoritarianism of both patriarchy and religions.

Literature review

Begum, Syed Hajira. Empowerment of women in purple hibiscus. Nesha, G. (2017). "The role of the language teacher in an inclusive setting: An illustration from the perspective of the primary school teacher inclusive education. *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, 5(5), 408-418. Recognising the importance of sisterhood in the life of women to face the challenges of the patriarchal world. Determining how social change can occur in the lives of African women that results in empowerment, new identity and gender equality. Astrick, Tiffany. Patriarchal Oppression and Women Empowerment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie - *Purple Hibiscus*. *Vivid: Journal of Language and Literature* 7.2 (2018): 45-50. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie has singled out domestic violence, religion, tradition and family life for their role in oppressing women and is calling on women to have a voice to fight their oppressor. The characters of Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* are the epitomes of women asserting their positions in their society and challenging patriarchy with its several manifestations. Beatrice uses the typical stereotype of African women as oppressed, Hillman, Susanne. Ngewo, Nyatenda. "The language of bodies: Violence and the refusal of judgment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*. *Research in African Literatures* 50.1 (2019): 95-110. The body is central to the plot of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* and destroyed bodies are central to the plot of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In this essay, I look at the author's depiction of such violent acts as murder and rape, and the ethical considerations that revolve around her practice of rejection of narrative closure. I believe the author's avoidance of judgement on her characters is an effective rhetorical strategy designed to cause discomfort for her audience. My interest lies in both violated and destroyed bodies as well as those that violate and destroy.

Washaly, Najeeb. Representations of Gender Violence in the novel, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie. 2018, *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities* 6.12 (2018): 2043-67. The entire novel, Adichie tried to pass on a message that both men and women should break free from any cultural or religious system that are hard and stifle them from moving forward and achieving well-being. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a powerful narration of fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike who, together with her mother and brother, is a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of Eugene,

her religious fundamentalist father. The three of them, Kambili, her mother Beatrice and her brother Jaja, live in fear of Eugene's wrath as he controls almost every aspect of their lives. But the members of the family have only one way of speaking "with their spirits than with their lips" (2005, p.16) in Eugene's extreme beliefs about the proper behavior of the family. By this, the narrator means that the members of the family cannot voice out their feelings. Most of the studies on the novel have concentrated on the political instability of postindependent Nigeria, arguing that the turbulence and the despotism of the character Eugene Achike, through his religious fanaticism, is a microcosm of the political situation of the contemporary Nigeria; that "one needs to observe... how this naïve character reveals in somewhat innocent silence", the agony in her society: "she exposes several military oddities with the eyes of an innocent observer" (Oha, 2007, p. 200). In the same vein, Susan Andrade's paper, "Adichie's Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels" also claims that *Purple Hibiscus* is a book about politics of the family, while at the same time it is a clear book about stories of the nation. So in doing so, "by illustrating a cross continental set of inspirations and intertexts" in the novel she "reveals Adichie's exploration of the contemporary Nigerian political crisis" (Andrade, 2011, p. 91). However, Charlotte Larson has a different interpretation of the two scholars mentioned above. In her research, "links the restrictions and abuse suffered by Kambili and her family," (Larson, n.d, p. 2) she centers around the Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2005) published by Harper Perennial, London. The following page numbers refer to this edition. 2 Related studies include Kehinde (2013), Ouma (2013). Asante Lucy Mtenje recounts 65 methods of surveillance and torture which Papa Eugene Achike inflicted on his family to control them. The perspectives taken in the studies cited above have been the one of the mother-daughter dyad and the impact that socialization by gender has in such relationships. The approach applied in my analysis of the novel is different from the above studies since it is based on the dyad of mother and daughter and the effect socialization by gender has on such dyads. Lucy is a novel about a young black West Indian woman of the same name who migrates to the United States of America to work as an au pair for a white family.

Both her controlling parents and colonial educational traditions constrain her abilities and she will not indulge in any sense of yearning for her homeland, "...even to think such words (bad words) in their presence (she) would have been scolded severely" (1990, p. 13). At the center of the novel is Lucy's quest for independence and an identity which is separate from that of her mother. A number of research studies have concentrated on the text as an

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illustration of a migration story. In the light of this development Katherine Suggs and Rey Chow (2002, p. 157) say that Kincaid's Lucy does not "want to engage in the now-familiar postcolonial stories of reconnecting with and retracing one's cultural roots". The two feel that Lucy "fits the category of a pitched battle against the assumptions that have formed many of the "exile" and "displacement" oppositional narratives that have become central to both postcolonial and Caribbean literary canons" (Suggs & Chow, 2002, p. 157). It is assumed that the celebration of "return" follows the alienating experience of "exile. However, this assumption is not true in Lucy's case because even though she is nostalgic about home, she makes up her mind never to return to the stifling island that was once her home. In the same vein of migration stories, Janelle Martin (n.d.) examines the novel by examining Lucy's quest/ struggle as a foreigner and immigrant, what is more, a woman of color in the multicultural landscape of the United States. She states that "As immigrants move through the process of a physical change of environment, they also undergo a significant change in their identities. Their identities as immigrants are reconstructed as they become a part of the political, social, and cultural norms of a group of people they identify with" (Martin, n.d, p. 35).

This paper critically analyzes how the mother-daughter relationship contributes to the formation of a female identity in a male dominated society, unlike any of the other papers on Lucy that focus on the process of her becoming an immigrant to the US. In addition, the paper explores how Lucy transcends the boundaries of her culture by challenging and revising the values of her mother, who have been imparted to her. Unlike other women in the novel, Lucy asserts her independence by being in charge of her sexuality and her destiny in a journey of self discovery. One time, Adrienne Rich (1986, p. 225) claimed that "the cathexis between mother and daughter—essential, distorted, misused—is the great unwritten story". Since then, of course, a lot of mother/daughter literature, critical and imaginative, has filled the void Rich mentioned. In contrast to the literature review and engagement with scholarship on the topic, this paper joins the discussion on mother-daughter relationships by critically exploring the potential and constraints of the influence of patriarchy in the construction of a female identity in a male-dominated society and making a comparison in the representations of the two authors to be studied. 3 Jamaica Kincaid, (1990). Luc

The Trauma Theory, by Judith Herman

Trauma and Recovery, by Judith Herman, is a seminal work that theorises trauma as an experience of disruption and disturbance to an individual's sense of self, safety, and relational

stability. Herman says there are three overlapping phases of trauma recovery: Safety-The survivor needs to be physically and psychologically safe. Only when the person is able to get away from the trauma source and receive supportive relationships does recovery become possible. Violence need not be used very often, only when it is needed it must be convincing." "One good beating is good for a year" is a saying in the battered women's movement. One victim might say, "I saw in his eyes, and I knew that he could kill me." After that, the possibility of violence, or just that expression of his eyes, may be enough to elicit displays of submission and she will be on constant guard for that expression. (Herman, p.20)

The second stage of Remembrance and Mourning is to engage with the traumatic memories and to make sense of them through a narrative. Survivors will have to verbalize past experiences and losses that they were unable to cope with before. "Violence is the final weapon in the arsenal of those wishing to retain dominance but it is not the only one; there are a number of other ways to coerce others into obeying and within their control." (Herman, p.19). Reconnection-The Last Phase allows survivors to re-integrate into society and develop a new identity with agency, autonomy, and purposeful connections. The intense trauma-induced shifts in basic trust, in the felt sense of shame, guilt and inferiority, and in the avoidance of reminders of trauma in social life, all promote distancing from close relationships".(Herman,p.63)

Trauma and the Fragmentation of Identity

The novel starts with Kambili being intensely psychologically repressed. Authoritarian control is not just physical but emotional and spiritual as well with Eugene Achike. His high demands encourage a climate of fear and stifle expression. There's blood on the ground, Jaja said. I'll fetch the brush from the bathroom. We swept the dribbling blood, as though someone had taken a can of red watercolor down all the way to the bottom. I wiped and Jaja scrubbed." (Adichie,p. 19). Kambili's quietness is a symptom of internal trauma. The fact that she cannot speak freely is a symptom of many trauma survivors, one of the divisions of identity. Herman notes that, in the aftermath of trauma, the victim's ability to act is undermined and they may feel helpless and alienated. Her eyes were empty, like those of the insane who prowl the road garbage dumps around town, hauling around their stinking, torn canvas bags of life snippets (Adichie ,p.20). Achike's house is not a house of protection but a house of surveillance and punishment. As such, Kambili is taught a sense of identity based on command and fear, instead of free will and freedom. Her psychological state is an example of how Herman states that traumatic environments threaten

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personal autonomy and alter self-perception. I went upstairs then and sat there staring at my textbook, as the black letters faded out and into a bright red, like the red of fresh blood, flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes" (Adichie p.21).

Trauma and recovery in the context of memory

Memory plays a significant role in the storyline of Adichie's book. The novel is told in hindsight by Kambili, making the reader understand how important it is to remember traumatic memories when describing them. In the beginning, it was disorganized and difficult. Kambili remembers instances of violence with hesitancy and emotional restraint, a sign of the challenges faced by trauma survivors when facing up to traumatic experiences. But as the story continues, memory becomes a process of self-discovery. We learn how domestic abuse can be remembered and how that remembrance can help Kambili see the oppressive systems that are affecting her life. In a process of remembrance she gains the important insight into the link between fear and subjugation. Memory thus becomes transformative and not just retrospective.

According to Herman, remembrance is an essential part of healing as it helps to integrate fragmented experiences into a story. As Kambili's memories slowly form a coherent narrative of her life, she is able to claim for herself a new sense of self beyond her father-created identity. When the truth is finally acknowledged, "recovery is possible" (Herman, p.8) for the survivors; however, often it's not, and when it does, the survivors' narrative of the traumatic event appears not as a story told but as a symptom, "a highly emotional, contradictory and fractured manner" that undermines credibility and serves the twin imperatives of "truth-telling" and "secrecy" (Herman, p.8).

The journey to safety: Nsukka as a space of transformation

The trip to Nsukka is the first step of trauma healing. Auntie Ifeoma's home is very different from the strict and domineering atmosphere where Kambili had grown up. Auntie Ifeoma's family is an environment where communication, free thought, and freedom of expression are fostered. These situations allow Kambili to grow psychologically safe. Herman stresses that it is essential for survivors to have relationships where they are trusted and respected in order to begin recovery. Authoritarian and nurturing parental styles are contrasted in Eugene and Ifeoma, respectively, suggesting different paradigms of family and authority. As a result of these experiences, Kambili starts to see possibilities for selfhood beyond fear and submission. "Traumatic events are not events that happen rarely, but rather events that are outside of what the norm of a human being can adapt to when life normally goes on." (Herman, p.41)

Memories and Mourning: facing traumatic experience

Kambili begins to be more conscious of the violence she has lived through and she enters Herman's second phase of recovery. This includes recognizing the emotional effects of trauma and the loss of childhood and personal freedom. Eugene's death is a pivotal moment in this period. His death brings an immediate end to his violence, but also leaves Kambili with mixed feelings of fear, sadness, guilt and happiness. The integration of such opposites into a unity of understanding of what has happened in trauma recovery is necessary. The ability of Kambili to reflect suggests her progress towards psychological healing. Remembrance helps her to turn the painful memories into sources of insights and not into paralysing impediments.

Woman empowerment and restoration of voice

The best part of Kambili's healing is the maturing of her voice. The novel's theme is the power and empowerment of silence vs. speech, representing the control of patriarchy throughout the novel. Female empowerment is portrayed through various interlinked characters of Adichie. Auntie Ifeoma is intellectual and a woman who defies the expectations of the patriarchy due to her assertive personality. Beatrice Achike is resilient in the face of all the abuse she suffered, and as Kambili learns through observation and experience, her confidence is slowly growing. Feminist empowerment does not come from rebellion per se but from reclaiming subjectivity. The reconstruction of identity is evident in Kambili's increased willingness to give voice to opinions, relationships, and envision the future without her father. A feminist approach to trauma recovery dovetails into the process of resisting structures that aim to silence women. Empowerment, Adichie suggests, starts with women's awareness of their power to act and define themselves. In this state of hyperarousal, the initial cardinal symptom of PTSD, the traumatized person remains easily startled, easily provoked by minor events, and does not sleep as well. (Herman, p.42)

Reconnections and reconstruction of identities

Lastly, the last phase of Herman's model is re-connection to life and community. At the end of this novel, Kambili has changed herself. Trauma is still a part of her story; it is not a part of her life. The revitalisation of her relationship with Jaja and her positive outlook on the future suggest identity reconstruction. She is able to imagine other possibilities than victimization: she is beginning to become resilient and autonomous. This shift is indicative of Herman's belief that the recovery process does not negate or obliterate traumatic events but rather becomes part of a larger story of survival and growth. Kambili's reconstructed identity is a symbol of remembrance and

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renewal. The representation of trauma has become a major preoccupation in contemporary African literature, both to understand the psychological implications of political violence, domestic oppression, colonial experiences and gender subjugation. Trauma narratives have been suggested as a key way that marginalized voices are able to illustrate their experiences that have been historically ignored or suppressed by literary scholars. In this context, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has a prominent place in her sensitive description of individual and collective suffering in postcolonial Nigeria. In *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), she examines the dynamics of religious authoritarianism, patriarchal rule and psychological trauma, and how oppressive social structures impact personal identity and memory. Traumatic memory is not narrated verbally or put into context, it is experienced instead in terms of vivid sensations and images. (Herman, p.44). The examination of Adichie's fiction has been much concerned with her exploration of the postcolonial experiences, including the conflict between tradition and modernity, religion and freedom, and authority and resistance. Scholars have commented that *Purple Hibiscus* not only represents trauma as a personal psychological state but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon within the medical and cultural systems of the family and nation. Domestic violence in the novel has been interpreted as a microcosm of the other systems of oppression in postcolonial societies. The existing research, however, has examined violence and resistance in the text, and there have been fewer investigations of the complex interplay between traumatic memory and reconstruction of identity, using contemporary trauma theory. "Similar oscillations occur in the regulation of intimacy. Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships." (Herman, p.63)

Judith Herman, a trauma theorist, and literary representation

Trauma studies have their theoretical roots in the work of Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), which transformed the conceptualization of psychological trauma from a personal experience to the social and political context. Herman suggests that traumatic events affect people's sense of selves, and break links between memory, identity and social belonging. In her view, the characteristics of trauma, in her framework, are the fragmentation of memory, emotional dis-empowerment, and the dissolution of personal agency. But recovery is possible in a way

of remembering, through the reconstruction of a story, and by reconnecting with the community. "Social support is a powerful predictor of good recovery, social isolation is toxic, people cannot feel safe alone, they cannot mourn and make meaning alone" (Herman, p.6). This model has been adopted by a growing number of literary scholars to explore and theorize narratives of violence and recovery, as fiction affords a particularly privileged, if fictional, environment for the representation of the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Herman's three phases of recovery (safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection) have been especially important to literary criticism because they allow scholars to follow the characters' psychological paths through traumatic situations. Herman's theory has proved to be fruitful in the work of scholars who have explored women's narratives, particularly in the context of reclaiming agency in oppressive settings. However, the use of Herman's approach in African feminist literature is still somewhat limited and this creates opportunities for further studies.

The issue covered in this section is domestic violence and psychological trauma. This section's issue is domestic violence and psychological trauma. The depiction of domestic violence in *Purple Hibiscus* has been the subject of much criticism. Eugene Achike's authoritarianism has been recognized by scholars as a reflection of the power of the father, legitimated by religious fundamentalism. The physical and psychological abuse of the family members instills fear and silence, having a significant impact on the emotional growth of both Kambili and Jaja. Some critics have suggested that the novel's domestic environment serves as a traumatic space in which the act of violence is not only accepted, but even justified by religion and patriarchy. The first time Kambili is silent, it's shown to be the result of the psychological effects of prolonged abuse. Her lack of expression has been seen as a repression caused by trauma. Likewise, investigations into the issue of Jaja's revolt have indicated that the revolt came as a reaction to long-term psychological oppression. These analyses illuminate the impact of DV experiences but many tend to focus on the externalities of DV experiences, instead of understanding the internal workings of traumatic memory affecting identity development. Thus, the processes through which memory plays a role in recovery and self-reconstruction have not been sufficiently explored.

Memory as a Site of Trauma and Recovery

Memory plays a pivotal role in the study of trauma as traumatic experiences often defy a narrative approach. Stressed out by trauma theory, scholars have maintained that the warped memories of trauma survivors can often fragment their sense of self, resulting in a lack of continuity. Memory is

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a repository of pain and a means to reconstruct identity in literary narratives. By remembering, people can change their interpretation of traumatic events, and can recover a feeling of personal continuity. Memory is a moving force in *Purple Hibiscus*, shifting and alternating between Kambili's silence and self-expression. Some critics have noted the way the novel is told mirrors the process of suppressed experiences coming into consciousness. Remembering the violence, fear and emotional deprivation becomes a critical element in the development of the protagonist's identity. Moreover, the scholars have proposed that memory is used politically in Adichie's fiction to unmask covert forms of oppression in familial and social institutions. While there is prior scholarship that has acknowledged the novel's importance of memory, there are comparatively few studies that delve into how memory operates, in particular within Herman's recovery framework. This kind of method enables a more complete picture of the role of traumatic memories in identity construction instead of just in the documentation of suffering.

Feminist Empowerment and Female Subjectivity

The feminist critics have always pointed to Adichie's dedication to depictions of female resistance to patriarchal oppression. *Purple Hibiscus* has been popularly interpreted as a feminist story, as it portrays the resilience and self-determination of women against the backdrop of genderist ordering. Female characters like Auntie Ifeoma who are independent, intellectually confident and emotionally strong have been highlighted by scholars as being of paramount importance as they offer an alternative to Kambili's womanhood. The study of feminist empowerment in novels has tended to emphasize how women contend with constraining social norms and maintain their individual agency. Auntie Ifeoma's house is a counter-space to Eugene's authoritarianism, a space in which there are possibilities of freedom, conversation, and emotion. They say that the environment of the lead school awakens Kambili's travels and development. Likewise, Beatrice's eventual rejection of victimhood is seen as a form of resistance against "systematic abuse."

Even though there have been ample feminist analyses, the link between trauma recovery and empowerment is understudied. The sociological and/or ideological aspects of resistance have been explored extensively in previous research, but the psychological mechanisms by which empowerment takes shape have not been adequately captured. Herman's trauma theory is relevant to this missing link, as it understands empowerment as a key part of trauma healing and reconstruction of identity.

Identity reconstruction and narrative transformation

Identity reconstruction has been the recent focus of many studies in the field of trauma. It is believed that the trauma causes disruption to existing self-concept, and a new one must be developed to incorporate the painful memories. Narrative representation is an important part of this process since storytelling provides a way for survivors to construct coherent stories about themselves from their fragmented experiences. In the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, the transformation of Kambili's life illustrates the power of storytelling. Her transition from fear, silence and dependency to confidence and self-awareness is a process of reconfiguration of identity. This shift has been noted as being enhanced by interpersonal relationships, emotional support, and opportunities to experience other social realities. In these experiences, Kambili develops the ability to rethink the past and to imagine a future free from oppression.

Previous studies have focused on character development and personal growth in the novel, but systematic links between identity reconstruction and memory and feminist empowerment have yet to be made in a trauma-informed approach. This can provide insight into the ways in which recovery happens beyond the personal and is social in nature, relating with others, within a community, and in opposition to the patriarchy.

Conclusion

Purple Hibiscus is a deep exploration of trauma, memory and identity set in a postcolonial Nigeria. In Kambili Achike's exploration of a traumatic world, she illustrates how such an environment can tear apart the self, and how it also offers opportunities for resilience and change. Judith Herman's trauma theory explains how the protagonist journeys through each of the three phases of safety, remembrance and reconnection, and finally self-reconstruction. In the novel, the source of most psychological trauma is domestic violence. Memory is an important tool for trauma healing and re-construction of identity. Kambili's effects on development are very similar to Herman's three-stage model of recovery. Feminist empowerment is about reclaiming the voice, agency and self-expression. Adichie condemns patriarchal and religious authoritarianism, and highlights the strength of women. Trauma recovery is illustrated as an ongoing journey, not a one-time process. The study confirms memory as a healing process that allows the survivors to reframe and to take back control of their painful experiences. Moreover, the novel explores the interconnections between trauma healing and feminist empowerment, and how a sense of voice can be a form of resistance against a patriarchal regime. Adichie's story, therefore, makes a significant contribution to the ongoing debates on trauma studies, feminist criticism and to postcolonial identity formation. Finally, *Purple*

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Hibiscus is a statement that healing is not a blotting out of the pain, but rather a new self that is able to face and overcome traumatic pasts.

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