

ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS AND AMERICANAH

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the interplay between economic and environmental factors as determinants of women's empowerment in two seminal works by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Americanah* (2013). Drawing on African feminist theory and reformist feminist approaches, this study employs qualitative textual analysis to investigate how socio-economic conditions and environmental contexts—familial, cultural, religious, and migratory—shape female characters' trajectories toward self-determination. The analysis reveals that economic dependency and patriarchal environmental structures constitute primary barriers to women's empowerment, while education, financial autonomy, and supportive social networks emerge as critical enablers. The article demonstrates that Adichie's female protagonists navigate complex terrains of oppression and opportunity, ultimately asserting agency through strategic resistance, educational pursuit, and economic independence. The findings contribute to postcolonial feminist discourse by illustrating how environmental contexts mediate women's access to power and how economic factors intersect with cultural norms to either constrain or facilitate empowerment. This study proposes that sustainable women's empowerment requires simultaneous transformation of both economic structures and socio-cultural environments.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Economic Factors, Environmental Challenges, African Feminism, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Postcolonial Literature, Patriarchy, Migration.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Women's empowerment remains one of the most critical socio-political imperatives in contemporary global discourse, particularly within postcolonial African contexts where patriarchal structures continue to constrain female agency. Literature, as Eagleton (2003) contends, serves as a transformative medium that "intensifies ordinary language" and fulfills "highly particular functions in many societies," including the documentation of social injustice and the advocacy for marginalized voices. In this regard, African women writers have emerged as crucial architects of cultural resistance, employing narrative fiction to interrogate systemic inequalities and envision pathways toward gender equity.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie stands as one of the most prominent contemporary voices in this literary tradition. Her works systematically deconstruct the multifaceted oppression of women across diverse environments—domestic, religious, educational, migratory, and professional—while simultaneously mapping strategies of resistance and empowerment. This article focuses on two of her most critically acclaimed novels, *Purple Hibiscus* and *Americanah*, to examine

how economic and environmental factors function as both barriers to and catalysts for women's empowerment.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Conceptual Literature

2.1.1 Defining Women's Empowerment

The concept of empowerment, as articulated by Freire (1970) in his seminal *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, originates from the recognition that every society comprises oppressor and oppressed forces, with the critical function of consciousness-raising being to enable the oppressed to liberate themselves. Whitmore (1998) defines empowerment as "an interactive process through which people experience personal and social change, enabling them to take action to achieve influence over the organizations and institutions which affect their lives." Wallerstein (1992) emphasizes the acquisition of "social, economic and political power to liberate themselves from injustices in society."

Women's empowerment, specifically, must be understood as multidimensional. Kabeer (2005) insists that the concept "must be understood in relation to the specific needs of the people who are yearning for empowerment." This study adopts a framework that distinguishes between:

- Social empowerment: Addressing gender inequities in societal structures (Srivastav, 2001);
- Economic empowerment: The process of according women "the power to become 'bread winners,' to be self-reliant, to generate income from projects and fight poverty" (Elliot, 2008);
- Psychological empowerment: The process by which women "increase their motivation, self-interests and morale to become more involved in national plans" (Pam Rajput, 2001).

2.1.2 Environment as Analytical Category

For the purposes of this study, "environment" is understood not merely as physical space but as the totality of external social, cultural, economic, and institutional resources available to individuals (Basorum and Ayeni, 2013). Following Onuoha (2000), we distinguish between physical and social environments, with primary attention to the latter. The social environment encompasses:

- Familial environment: Domestic power relations, marital structures, and intergenerational dynamics;
- Religious environment: Institutional practices, doctrinal interpretations, and spiritual communities;
- Educational environment: Access to knowledge, pedagogical relationships, and academic institutions;
- Economic environment: Labor markets, property rights, and financial systems;
- Cultural environment: Norms, traditions, linguistic practices, and symbolic systems;

- Political environment: Governance structures, civic participation, and policy frameworks.

2.1.3 Economic Factors in Women's Empowerment

Economic empowerment constitutes a foundational dimension of women's overall empowerment. According to Morrison et al. (2007), gender equality correlates highly with economic growth, while Dollar and Gatti (1999) demonstrate that gender inequality is more prevalent in poorer countries. Rahman (2013) argues that "gender inequality is a product of the power relationships that exist between women and men in society," with economic resources serving as a primary medium of this power differential.

In African contexts, Mpundu (2006) identifies economic obstacles to women's empowerment as including: limited access to land and credit, the burden of familial welfare provision ("woman provider of familial welfare"), and the high costs of education and professional formation. These economic constraints are compounded by what she terms "six arms' woman"—the multiple, simultaneous labor burdens borne by women.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical orientations: African Feminist Theory and Reformist Feminist Theory.

2.2.1 African Feminist Theory

African feminism, as elaborated by Kolawole (1997), centers womanhood as neither controversial nor conflicting with African women's self-understanding. Unlike Western feminist traditions that may advocate for women's sameness to men, African feminism recognizes that "they are not seeking to be like men, look like men, or necessarily act like men." Arndt (2002) emphasizes the necessity of speaking of "feminisms" in the plural, given the diversity of social realities across the African continent.

Key tenets of African feminism relevant to this study include:

- The recognition of African women's historical agency and resistance;
- The affirmation of family and community as sites of both oppression and support;
- The critique of colonial and neo-colonial structures that compound gender inequality;
- The insistence on culturally grounded strategies for empowerment.

2.2.2 Reformist Feminist Theory

The reformist feminist approach, as distinguished from radical feminism by West (2004), advocates for "gradual and incremental" progress toward gender equality rather than revolutionary transformation. This perspective is particularly suited to analyzing Adichie's fiction, which often portrays women working within existing structures to effect change rather than overthrowing systems entirely. Reformist feminism acknowledges that:

- Men with oppressive tendencies can change through dialogue and institutional reform;

- Positive aspects of patriarchal societies can be harnessed for women's empowerment;
- Full equality requires negotiation with, rather than destruction of, existing social structures.

2.2.3 New Criticism and Formalist Analysis

Methodologically, this study employs New Criticism's close reading techniques to analyze textual evidence. As Mongbolo (2010) notes, New Criticism "tends to emphasize the text as an autotelic artifact, something complete with itself, written for its own sake, united in its form." This formalist approach enables rigorous analysis of how Adichie's narrative techniques—plot structure, characterization, dialogue, imagery—construct meaning around economic and environmental factors in women's empowerment.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design based on textual analysis of primary literary sources. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the phenomenon under investigation—women's empowerment as mediated by economic and environmental factors—is "human, social in nature, and not subjected to quantification and statistical presentation" (Given, 2008).

3.2 Analytical Procedure

The analytical process involves:

1. Close reading of both primary texts to identify passages relevant to economic and environmental factors;
2. Thematic coding of textual evidence according to categories of economic barriers, environmental constraints, and empowerment strategies;
3. Comparative analysis of how these factors operate differently across the two novels' distinct settings;
4. Theoretical interpretation of findings through the lens of African feminist and reformist feminist frameworks.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

As a literary analysis, this study does not involve human subjects. However, scholarly integrity is maintained through accurate citation, fair representation of sources, and transparent methodological procedures.

4.0 ECONOMIC FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

4.1 Economic Dependency in Purple Hibiscus

In *Purple Hibiscus*, economic dependency emerges as the primary mechanism through which patriarchal control is exercised and maintained. The novel's central female characters—Beatrice (Mama) and Auntie Ifeoma—represent contrasting responses to economic constraint.

4.1.1 Beatrice's Economic Subjugation

Beatrice Achike embodies the economically dependent wife whose complete financial reliance on her husband, Eugene, renders her vulnerable to systematic abuse. As the narrator Kambili observes, Mama "was whispering, too, but I heard her well" when discussing household matters, her voice constrained by the power dynamics of economic dependency (PH: 56-57). The text explicitly links Beatrice's inability to leave her abusive marriage to her lack of economic alternatives:

"Have you forgotten that Eugene offered to buy me a car, even before Ifediora died? He wanted us to send Amaka to convent school. He even wanted me to stop wearing makeup... But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things" (PH: 57).

This passage, spoken by Auntie Ifeoma, indirectly illuminates Beatrice's position: while Eugene's sister refuses conditional economic support, Beatrice has no such option. Her economic captivity is total—she lacks independent income, property rights, or access to familial wealth. The novel documents how this dependency enables Eugene's violence, which causes recurrent miscarriages and psychological trauma.

Beatrice's eventual resort to poison represents the tragic outcome of economic desperation. When she declares, "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (PH: 177), she reveals both her resourcefulness and her profound constraint: lacking economic or social power to escape, she employs the only means available within her environmental context.

4.1.2 Auntie Ifeoma's Economic Struggle and Resistance

Auntie Ifeoma presents a contrasting model of economic self-sufficiency, albeit precarious. As a university lecturer and widow, she maintains independent income while raising three children. Her economic autonomy enables her outspokenness and resistance to patriarchal authority, including that of her wealthy brother Eugene. However, the novel does not romanticize her position: she struggles with inadequate salary, unreliable electricity, and material scarcity.

Ifeoma's economic independence is nonetheless transformative. It allows her to:

- Refuse Eugene's conditional gifts and maintain dignity;
- Provide a refuge for Kambili and Jaja from their father's tyranny;
- Model alternative gender relations for her children and nieces;
- Eventually migrate to America when Nigerian academic conditions deteriorate.

Her declaration—"Nwunye m, things are tough, but we are not dying yet" (PH: 45)—articulates a philosophy of resilient self-reliance that contrasts sharply with Beatrice's fatalistic endurance.

4.2 Economic Challenges in Americanah

Americanah expands the analysis of economic factors to transnational contexts, examining how migration, race, and global capitalism reshape women's economic opportunities and constraints.

4.2.1 Ifemelu's Economic Trajectory

Ifemelu's journey from Nigeria to America traces a complex arc of economic disempowerment followed by gradual, ambivalent empowerment. Initially, her family's middle-class status in Nigeria provides relative security, though her father's intellectual employment offers limited financial stability. Upon arrival in America, Ifemelu experiences acute economic vulnerability:

"Now what I need is help to relax. If you want the job you have it. I'd pay you a hundred dollars, with the possibility of a raise and you'd work as needed, no set schedule" (AM: 177).

This offer, from a predatory employer who demands sexual favors, illustrates the extreme economic precarity faced by undocumented or semi-documented immigrant women. Ifemelu's subsequent depression and isolation stem directly from this economic exploitation.

Her economic transformation begins with employment as Kimberly's babysitter, which provides not merely income but access to networks of privilege. Through Curt, Kimberly's cousin, she secures professional employment in communications and ultimately citizenship documentation. However, the novel critically examines the costs of this economic advancement: Ifemelu must perform race and class identity in ways that compromise her authentic self, including adopting American-accented speech and relaxing her hair.

Ifemelu's creation of the blog "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America" (AM: 366) represents her ultimate economic and intellectual empowerment. By commodifying her critical perspective on American racial dynamics, she achieves financial independence through intellectual labor rather than domestic or sexual service. This trajectory—from exploited care worker to autonomous cultural critic—demonstrates the potential for economic empowerment through knowledge production and digital entrepreneurship.

4.2.2 Auntie Uju's Economic Adaptation

Auntie Uju's economic narrative illustrates the gendered costs of migration and the complex negotiations required for survival. Initially dependent on "The General" for housing, employment, and social status, Uju experiences catastrophic economic displacement upon his death. Her flight to America with son Dike initiates a period of extreme labor exploitation:

"I'm tired. I'm so tired. I thought by now things would be better for me and Dike. I was studying and working three jobs" (AM: 134).

Uju's three-job survival strategy exemplifies the "six arms' woman" phenomenon identified by Mpundu (2006)—the multiplication of labor burdens without corresponding economic security. Her eventual achievement of medical licensure and professional employment represents significant economic empowerment, yet the novel questions whether this success compensates for the psychological costs of her journey.

Uju's relationship with Bartholomew further complicates the economic analysis. Her decision to marry him reflects the persistent belief that male partnership provides economic security—a belief that proves mistaken given his "lazy and indifferent" character (AM: 142). Her eventual rejection of this marriage signals her recognition that economic independence, however precarious, surpasses dependent partnership.

4.3 Comparative Economic Analysis

Dimension Purple Hibiscus Americanah

Primary economic barrier: Complete dependency within patriarchal familyPrecarity in racialized labor markets

Economic resource: Male breadwinner (Eugene); multiple: male partners, ethnic networks, self-employment

Path to empowerment Extreme resistance (poisoning); gradual accumulation through education and cultural capital

Role of education Limited (Beatrice); enabling (Ifeoma). Central to Ifemelu's trajectory; essential for Uju's professionalization

Economic autonomy outcomeFatal for Beatrice; migratory for Ifeoma; ambivalent success for Ifemelu; professional stability for Uju

5.0 ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS INFLUENCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

5.1 Familial Environment in Purple Hibiscus

The familial environment in Purple Hibiscus functions as the primary site of both oppression and potential liberation. Eugene Achike's household exemplifies what Udumuku (2007) describes as the "good woman" paradigm, where "silence and passivity are two principal features" enforced through patriarchal violence.

5.1.1 The Achike Household as Patriarchal Environment

Eugene's domestic tyranny is totalizing, extending to religious practice, physical mobility, educational performance, and emotional expression. The novel's opening—"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" (PH: 1)—establishes the violent enforcement of religious conformity as an environmental norm.

For Beatrice, this environment permits no autonomous space. Even her devotional practice—polishing the figurines that represent divine love—is destroyed by Eugene's rage. The figurines' destruction symbolizes the annihilation of women's spiritual and emotional autonomy within patriarchal domesticity. Her subsequent miscarriages, caused by Eugene's beatings, literalize the life-threatening nature of this environment.

5.1.2 Aunt Ifeoma's Household as Alternative Environment

Ifeoma's Nsukka home provides a counter-environment where "children are allowed to watch television and listen to religious songs, they even involve in domestic tasks" (PH analysis). The purple hibiscus itself—"rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom" (PH: 14)—metaphorizes this alternative familial ecology. Key environmental differences include:

- Democratic decision-making: Children participate in household discussions;
- Religious pluralism: Traditional and Catholic practices coexist;
- Emotional expressiveness: Laughter, debate, and affection are normalized;
- Gendered labor sharing: Domestic tasks are distributed without rigid sexual division.

Kambili's transformation within this environment—becoming "talkative" after initial timidity—demonstrates how environmental change can catalyze psychological empowerment.

5.2 Religious Environment in Purple Hibiscus

Adichie critically examines how religious institutions and practices constitute environmental factors that can either oppress or empower women. Eugene's Catholicism is weaponized to justify domestic tyranny, while Father Amadi represents a more inclusive, culturally syncretic religious practice.

The contrast between Father Benedict—"austere and offer[ing] only his view of religion"—and Father Amadi, who "incorporat[es] native Igbo songs of worship into his sermons" (PH analysis), illustrates how religious environmental variation affects women's experience. Father Amadi's encouragement of Kambili's questioning—"You should have learned the art of questioning from Amaka. Why does the tree's shoot go up and the root down?" (PH: 110)—models religious practice that empowers rather than silences female intellect.

5.3 Migratory and Diasporic Environment in Americanah

Americanah extends environmental analysis to transnational contexts, examining how migration transforms women's empowerment possibilities through radical environmental change.

5.3.1 The American Racial Environment

Ifemelu's arrival in America initiates her consciousness of race as an environmental factor that structures all social and economic interactions. The novel documents her gradual recognition that "fat in America was a bad word heaving with moral judgement like 'stupid' or 'bastard', and not a mere description like short or tall" (AM analysis). This environmental learning requires constant self-surveillance and adaptation.

The hair salon environment—where Ifemelu prepares for her return to Nigeria—serves as a microcosm of diasporic African women's economic and social networks. Aisha's braiding shop represents both economic opportunity (for the braiders) and cultural maintenance (for clients), while simultaneously revealing intra-African ethnic tensions and gendered expectations.

5.3.2 Digital Environment and Empowerment

Ifemelu's blog creates a novel environmental space for empowerment—virtual, anonymous, and transnational. This digital environment enables:

- Voice without physical vulnerability: She can speak critically without immediate bodily risk;
- Economic monetization: Her perspective becomes financially valuable;
- Community formation: She connects with others experiencing similar racial and gender dynamics;
- Identity experimentation: She can perform different versions of self without fixed commitment.

The blog's success—"thousands of unique visitors each month" and "good speaking fees" (AM: analysis)—demonstrates how new environmental configurations can circumvent traditional barriers to women's economic and intellectual empowerment.

5.4 Comparative Environmental Analysis

Environmental Domain Purple Hibiscus (Nigeria) Americanah (Transnational)

Familial Patriarchal tyranny vs. democratic alternative; dispersed kin networks; chosen partnerships

Religious Authoritarian Catholicism vs. syncretic practice Secular/racial identity replaces religious framing

Economic: Local capitalist patriarchy; racialized global capitalism Cultural: Igbo traditional/modern tension; African/American/African-American triangulation; Educational: University as limited refuge; University as migration pathway and professional credentialing

Digital Absent Critical new space for voice and income

6.0 INTERSECTION OF ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

6.1 Synergistic Oppression

The novels demonstrate that economic and environmental factors rarely operate independently; rather, they synergize to produce complex matrices of constraint. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice's economic dependency is inseparable from her environmental captivity within Eugene's household. Her lack of independent income prevents her from establishing alternative living arrangements, while the cultural environment stigmatizes divorce and single motherhood.

Similarly, in *Americanah*, Ifemelu's initial economic vulnerability as an immigrant is compounded by the racial environment that restricts her employment options. Her "Americanah" status—neither fully African nor African-American—creates environmental alienation that exacerbates economic precarity.

6.2 Cumulative Empowerment

Conversely, the novels illustrate how economic and environmental empowerment can be mutually reinforcing. Auntie Ifeoma's university employment provides not merely income but access to an intellectual environment that validates her critical perspectives. Her economic autonomy enables her to create a domestic environment that nurtures her children's—and her nieces'—development.

Ifemelu's blog success exemplifies this cumulative dynamic: her intellectual labor generates economic resources that facilitate her return to Nigeria, where she can establish a new environmental context more aligned with her identity. Her final reunion with Obinze suggests that economic and environmental empowerment may ultimately enable authentic relational fulfillment.

6.3 The Role of Education as Mediating Factor

Education emerges across both novels as the critical mediator between economic and environmental factors. For Ifeoma, university education provides professional credentials and critical consciousness. For Ifemelu, American higher education—however fraught—ultimately enables her professional trajectory. For Uju, medical education represents the long-term payoff for years of labor exploitation.

However, the novels also qualify education's empowering potential. Beatrice's relative lack of education is not portrayed as personal failure but as structural constraint. Moreover, Ifemelu's American education requires painful cultural compromises that the novel does not celebrate uncritically.

7.0 DISCUSSION

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This analysis confirms the utility of African feminist theory for understanding women's empowerment in postcolonial contexts. Adichie's characters demonstrate that African women's struggles cannot be reduced to simple narratives of patriarchal oppression or Western liberation. Rather, they navigate complex environments where traditional and modern, local and global, religious and secular forces intersect.

The reformist feminist framework proves particularly apt for analyzing Adichie's narrative strategies. Her protagonists rarely achieve empowerment through revolutionary rupture; instead, they accumulate resources, build alliances, and gradually transform their circumstances. Even Beatrice's poisoning—apparently the most radical act—emerges from years of endurance and represents a last resort rather than preferred strategy.

7.2 Literary Implications

Adichie's formal techniques reinforce her thematic concerns. The first-person narration in *Purple Hibiscus*—through Kambili's constrained consciousness—immerses readers in the environmental oppression that limits economic understanding. The more expansive third-person narration of *Americanah* enables broader social analysis while maintaining intimate access to Ifemelu's interiority.

The shift from Purple Hibiscus's Nigerian setting to Americanah's transnational scope reflects Adichie's expanding environmental vision. Where the earlier novel examines how women might transform or escape specific domestic environments, the later work interrogates how global structures of race, class, and gender create new configurations of constraint and possibility.

7.3 Policy and Practical Implications

This analysis suggests several implications for policy and practice aimed at women's empowerment:

1. Economic interventions must be environmentally contextualized: Cash transfers or microcredit alone cannot overcome patriarchal domestic environments; simultaneous attention to familial power relations is essential.
2. Environmental transformation requires economic resources: Shelters, legal services, and educational institutions that support women's empowerment require sustained funding.
3. Migration policies must recognize gendered economic vulnerabilities: Immigration regimes that render women dependent on male partners or exploitative employers perpetuate disempowerment.
4. Digital infrastructure represents emerging empowerment terrain: Investments in women's digital literacy and online platform access can create new economic and expressive opportunities.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This article has examined how economic and environmental factors intersect to shape women's empowerment in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Americanah. The analysis reveals that women's empowerment is neither purely economic nor purely environmental but emerges from the dynamic interaction of material resources and social contexts.

In Purple Hibiscus, economic dependency within patriarchal familial and religious environments produces devastating consequences for Beatrice, while Auntie Ifeoma's precarious economic autonomy enables her to create alternative environmental possibilities. In Americanah, transnational migration exposes new economic vulnerabilities while also creating opportunities for empowerment through education, cultural production, and digital entrepreneurship.

Adichie's fiction ultimately suggests that sustainable women's empowerment requires transformation of both economic structures and socio-cultural environments. Individual resilience and strategic adaptation—exemplified by Ifeoma, Ifemelu, and ultimately even Beatrice—are necessary but insufficient; structural change that addresses the root causes of gendered economic inequality is essential.

The reformist feminist orientation of Adichie's work implies that such transformation is possible through gradual, collaborative effort rather than revolutionary rupture. Men are not uniformly demonized but portrayed as capable of change; institutions are not uniformly

rejected but subject to reform. This nuanced vision offers a pragmatic yet hopeful framework for advancing women's empowerment in diverse African and global contexts.

Future research might extend this analysis to Adichie's other works, including *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Notes on Grief*, to examine how war and bereavement constitute additional environmental factors affecting women's economic and social empowerment. Comparative analysis with other African women writers—Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Sefi Atta—would further illuminate the range of literary strategies for representing women's empowerment processes.

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Appendix: Key Textual Evidence

Novel Passage Economic/Environmental Factor

Purple Hibiscus "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me" (PH: 177) Economic desperation enabling environmental violence

Purple Hibiscus: "But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things" (PH: 57) Dignity-based refusal of economic dependency

Americanah "I'm tired. I'm so tired. I thought by now things would be better for me and Dike. I was studying and working three jobs" (AM: 134) Multiple labor burdens of migrant women

Americanah "She signed on to WordPress, and her blog was born... Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black" (AM: 366) Digital entrepreneurship as empowerment pathway

Americanah "Princeton, in summer, smelled of nothing... She liked, most of all, that in this place, of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else" (AM: 6) Environmental class privilege enabling identity experimentation