Territorial Feminism and the Reconfiguration of Gendered Spaces in *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

This paper examines the character of Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* through the lens of territorial feminism, a theoretical framework that explores the relationship between gender, power, and spatial control. In the novel, domestic space functions as a site of patriarchal authority where Eugene exerts physical, emotional, and psychological dominance over his family. Beatrice initially appears confined within this oppressive territory, embodying silence, submission, and endurance. However, a closer analysis reveals her gradual resistance to the structures that seek to control her body, voice, and agency. By tracing Beatrice's experiences within the domestic sphere, this study argues that her final act of defiance represents a rupture of patriarchal territorial boundaries and an assertion of selfhood. Through territorial feminist perspectives, the paper highlights how the home, traditionally perceived as a safe and private space, becomes a contested arena of power and resistance. Beatrice's transformation from victimhood to agency demonstrates the complex ways women negotiate, challenge, and ultimately dismantle oppressive territorial structures. This paper contributes to feminist literary criticism by foregrounding the significance of spatial politics in understanding women's resistance and empowerment in contemporary African literature.

Keywords: Territorial Feminism, Patriarchy, Domestic Space, Female Agency, Resistance; Feminist Literary Criticism; African Literature.

Introduction

Territorial feminism is a feminist framework that emphasizes the deep connection between women's lives and the spaces they inhabit, arguing that gendered oppression is inseparable from struggles over land, territory, and belonging. It examines how control over physical spaces such as homes, villages, agricultural land, nations, and even ecological regions has historically mirrored the control exerted over women's bodies and identities under patriarchal and colonial systems. This perspective highlights how women are often symbolically linked to territory as bearers of culture, honour, and national purity, while being excluded from actual authority over land ownership, political borders, and decision-making processes. Territorial feminism is particularly significant in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts, where the legacies of colonial dispossession, forced migration, environmental exploitation, and war have disproportionately affected women, shaping their economic vulnerability and social roles. By foregrounding place and geography, territorial feminism challenges universalized, Western feminist models and insists on context-specific understandings of gender, recognizing that women's experiences of oppression and resistance are profoundly shaped by history, culture, and location. Ultimately, it redefines feminism as a struggle not only for gender equality but also for spatial justice, collective memory, and the right of women to claim, inhabit, and redefine their territories on their own terms. In contrast to this perspective, mainstream feminism has traditionally approached gender inequality through a more universal and individual-centred framework, prioritizing legal rights, personal autonomy, and equal participation within existing social and political structures. While such an approach has played a crucial role in advancing women's access to education, employment, and representation, it often abstracts women's experiences from the specific historical and

geographical contexts in which they are lived. Territorial feminism departs from this model by insisting that gender oppression is deeply embedded in spatial realities shaped by colonialism, nationalism, displacement, and environmental exploitation. Rather than seeking mere inclusion within dominant systems, it interrogates how these systems themselves operate through control over land, borders, and resources, disproportionately marginalizing women, especially in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts. By shifting the focus from individual empowerment to collective belonging and spatial justice, territorial feminism exposes the limitations of mainstream feminist narratives and redefines liberation as the right of women not only to be equal citizens, but also to claim, inhabit, and transform the territories that structure their social, cultural, and political lives.

In the article, The Female Body As Territory: Gender And Ecology In Literature by Dr. Priya says that "a territory is something that is ruled. It is something that has a master. For centuries, patriarchal society has treated the female body in the exact same way. Laws, religions, and customs have drawn lines around women's bodies. They have decided who owns them fathers, husbands, slave masters what they can produce, and where they can go. The female body, like the earth, has been viewed as a passive object, a vessel to be filled, a field to be ploughed, or a mine to be stripped of its treasures" (1). She also says that, English literature often reflects a deep-rooted cultural mindset that links women and nature, while sometimes also challenging it. The repeated use of the same language to describe land and the female body, such as virgin forests, fertile soil, or more violent phrases like raping the land and penetrating the frontier, is not accidental but revealing. These expressions show how language reflects a way of thinking in which both women and nature are seen as passive objects meant to be controlled or conquered. This mindset supports systems of domination and exploitation, valuing power over respect. By drawing attention to these patterns, the passage suggests that

literature can expose these harmful attitudes and encourage readers to question the cultural assumptions behind them.

Territorial feminism, therefore, moves beyond abstract notions of gender equality to foreground the importance of space, land, and belonging in shaping women's lived experiences. While mainstream feminism has traditionally emphasized individual rights, legal reforms, and inclusion within existing social structures, it often overlooks how power operates through the control of territory, both physical and symbolic. Territorial feminism challenges this limitation by insisting that gender oppression is inseparable from spatial realities shaped by patriarchy, colonial histories, nationalism, and authoritarian control. This shift from individual empowerment to collective and spatial justice allows for a more contextual understanding of women's resistance, particularly in postcolonial societies. Such a framework can be meaningfully traced in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, where domination and liberation are articulated through control over domestic and social spaces. The family home, though outwardly affluent, functions as a restrictive territory marked by silence, surveillance, and rigid discipline, revealing how patriarchal power is exercised through the regulation of space. In contrast, the alternative household emerges as a feminist territory of openness, dialogue, and emotional freedom, enabling women and children to reclaim agency by inhabiting space differently. By juxtaposing these environments and situating them within a broader context of political instability, the novel mirrors the parallel structures of state authoritarianism and domestic patriarchy. "We must also consider the judgment of productivity. A piece of land is considered 'good' if it produces crops or money. If it is a desert, a wetland, or a wild forest, it is often called 'useless,' 'barren' or 'waste'. Similarly, in many societies, a woman is valued based on her fertility and her ability to serve. If she produces children (especially sons), she is a 'good' territory. If she cannot have children, or chooses not to, she is called 'barren'. This word is used for both deserts and women, implying that their only

purpose is to produce for men. Contemporary feminist fiction challenges this value system. Writers create characters who refuse to be productive. They refuse to be mothers. They refuse to be useful. Sometimes, they embrace the barren landscape the desert or the icy tundra as a place of freedom. In these harsh landscapes, they are not expected to grow anything. They can just exist for themselves. This is a radical rejection of the capitalist and patriarchal demand for production" (Priya 3). This thought highlights how worth is often measured through output, whether applied to environments or to women. Spaces that generate profit or food are praised, while areas like wastelands or swamps are dismissed as having no value. A similar logic is imposed on women, whose social importance is frequently linked to reproduction and service. Those who do not fulfil these roles are treated as lacking purpose. Feminist fiction questions this mindset by presenting figures who deliberately step outside these expectations. By rejecting motherhood and traditional usefulness, they undermine the belief that existence must be justified through contribution. Stark settings such as frozen plains or arid regions become symbols of autonomy, offering places where nothing is demanded and selfhood can exist without obligation. Through this reimagining, such narratives challenge economic and gender systems that equate worth with constant output.

Through its nuanced portrayal of space as a site of both oppression and resistance, *Purple Hibiscus* exemplifies how territorial feminism redefines liberation not merely as equality within systems of power, but as the transformative reclamation of the territories domestic, social, and national, that shape women's lives. Within this framework, the character of Beatrice emerges as a powerful embodiment of territorial feminism. Her oppression is articulated less through public exclusion and more through her systematic dispossession within the domestic space she inhabits. Although she occupies the home, she exercises no real authority over it; the household functions as a rigid patriarchal territory where her movements, routines, and emotional expressions are strictly regulated. The repeated violence inflicted upon

her, resulting in multiple miscarriages, reveals how control over territory extends to control over the female body itself, reinforcing a central territorial feminist insight that domination of space and domination of women are deeply intertwined. Yet Beatrice's story also complicates readings of her as merely passive or silent. From a territorial feminist perspective, her final act of resistance, carried out within the very space that had long symbolized fear and confinement, represents a radical reclamation of territory. By disrupting the absolute authority that governed the home, she transforms the domestic space from a site of patriarchal control into one of contested power and self-assertion. Her resistance, though morally complex, underscores the novel's suggestion that feminist agency does not always manifest through overt rebellion but can emerge through the redefinition and repossession of lived spaces. Through Beatrice, *Purple Hibiscus* ultimately affirms territorial feminism's argument that liberation lies not only in equality or voice, but in reclaiming the territories, both spatial and bodily that structure women's lives. Beatrice's lived experience within the domestic space. The household is governed by rigid routines most visibly symbolized by the schedules posted on the walls which regulate not only daily activities but also emotional expression, turning the home into a disciplinary territory rather than a place of refuge. Mealtimes, religious observances, and even moments of apparent familial intimacy are marked by enforced silence and fear, demonstrating how Beatrice is denied any meaningful authority over the space she sustains through her labour. The repeated physical assaults she endures, resulting in multiple miscarriages, further collapse the boundary between territory and body, revealing how patriarchal control extends from the home into her physical being itself. At the same time, Beatrice's careful maintenance of order, polishing the figurines, arranging flowers, and preserving an outward appearance of calm, can be read as a fragile yet significant attempt to assert agency within a space that systematically erases her voice. Most critically, her final act of resistance takes place within the domestic sphere that had long functioned as a site of terror. By poisoning Eugene, Beatrice disrupts the

absolute authority that structured the household, transforming the home from a fixed patriarchal territory into a contested space of power. Though ethically complex, this act represents a decisive reclamation of both bodily autonomy and domestic territory, reinforcing the novel's territorial feminist insight that women's resistance often emerges not through overt rebellion, but through the radical redefinition of the spaces that confine them.

Beatrice is territorialized by Eugene through a systematic process in which her body, movement, voice, and domestic presence are brought under his absolute control, turning both her physical existence and the home into extensions of his authority. From a territorial feminist perspective, Eugene does not merely dominate Beatrice emotionally or physically; he claims her as part of his patriarchal territory, much like property that must be regulated, disciplined, and preserved according to his rigid moral and religious codes. "She stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with her bare hands" (7). Her silence can strongly suggest the impact of terrorized authority on her, but in a subtle, psychological way rather than an explicit one. By not speaking and instead focusing on the broken figurine, she appears subdued and inward-turned, which often signals fear, shock, or learned obedience. Kneeling and using her bare hands emphasizes vulnerability and submission, as if she is trying to quietly 'fix' the damage without drawing attention to herself. This kind of silence can reflect how authority has conditioned her to suppress her voice, choosing compliance over resistance. Rather than confronting the source of power, she internalizes the fear and responds through a small, careful action, showing how deeply the authority has intimidated her. This provides example of Beatrice's spatial negotiation. She polishes them meticulously, and their repeated destruction during Eugene's violent outbursts symbolizes the fragility of the small, carefully maintained territories she creates within the home. These figurines function as micro-territories, delicate attempts at order, beauty, and control within an environment structured by fear. When they finally break beyond repair, it

signals the collapse of these fragile coping spaces and foreshadows the necessity of a more radical act to reclaim safety. This shows that, how brutally Beatrice is controlled inside her domestic space she inhabits. Although Beatrice manages the household, she has no decision-making power within it. The house operates according to Eugene's schedules, rules, and silences, making Beatrice a resident without ownership. Her movements are restricted, her interactions monitored, and even ordinary domestic routines are shaped by his authority. This spatial control ensures that Beatrice's presence in the home is conditional and subordinate, reinforcing her lack of territorial agency. At the same time, Beatrice is territorialized through control over her body. The repeated physical violence that leads to her miscarriages reveals how Eugene extends his authority beyond space into her bodily autonomy. Her body becomes a site to be disciplined for perceived moral failures, collapsing the distinction between territorial control and physical domination. In territorial feminist terms, this reflects how patriarchal power treats women's bodies as controllable spaces that must conform to male-defined order and purity.

Beatrice was terribly made submissive through silencing and psychological regulation. Her limited speech, lowered gaze, and habitual apologies indicate an internalized occupation of the self. Silence becomes a boundary imposed upon her, ensuring that dissent never crosses into audible resistance. Over time, this silencing transforms Beatrice into what territorial feminism would describe as an occupied subject, one who exists within borders drawn by another's authority. Also, Eugene's religious and moral absolutism reinforce this territorialization by legitimizing control as righteousness. By framing domination as discipline and violence as correction, he naturalizes Beatrice's confinement within his ideological territory. Thus, Beatrice is territorialized not only physically but also morally and psychologically. Through Eugene's control, Beatrice is reduced from an autonomous individual to a contained territory, regulated and punished to maintain patriarchal order. Her eventual act

of resistance, therefore, becomes significant not simply as rebellion, but as a de-territorialization, a violent rupture that reclaims space, body, and self from prolonged occupation. Stating another example,

> Are you sure you want to stay in the car?" Papa asked.
>
> Mama was looking down; her hands were placed on her belly, to hold the wrapper from untying itself or to keep her bread and tea breakfast down. "My body does not feel right," she mumbled.
>
> "I asked if you were sure you wanted to stay in the car." Mama looked up. "I'll come with you. It's really not that bad (17).

This moment shows how a terrorized space operates not only through physical control, but through fear that suppresses even basic human needs like health and rest. Mama initially listens to her body, she feels unwell and wants to stay in the car, but Papa's stare and repeated question turn the space into one of intimidation. His silence and insistence carry authority, making her physical discomfort seem less important than obedience. The car, which could have been a place of refuge, becomes another controlled environment where her needs are monitored and questioned. By the end, Mama reverses her decision and minimizes her illness, saying it is "not that bad," which shows how deeply the terrorized space has conditioned her to deny her own pain. Her body is no longer fully hers; even her health must submit to power. This illustrates how oppressive authority infiltrates private spaces and restricts women's ability to listen to and act upon their own physical needs.

Beatrice's territorialization under Eugene's authority operates through a sustained regulation of space, body, and voice that transforms both the domestic environment and her selfhood into extensions of patriarchal control, closely aligning with Delmy Tania Cruz's theoretical formulation of the body–territory. Cruz conceptualizes the female body not as separate from territory but as a political and symbolic space that is occupied, disciplined, and

regulated in the same manner as land under patriarchal and colonial regimes. Within this framework, although Beatrice maintains the household, she exercises no real authority over it, the home functions according to rigid rules, schedules, and silences imposed by Eugene, rendering her a mere occupant rather than an owner of space. This reflects Cruz's argument that women are often entrusted with the labour of sustaining territory while being denied sovereignty over it. The violence inflicted upon Beatrice manifested in repeated miscarriages, collapses the distinction between domestic space and bodily autonomy, reinforcing Cruz's assertion that patriarchal power treats women's bodies as territories to be corrected and controlled. Equally significant is the psychological occupation enacted through enforced silence and moral regulation, where Beatrice's limited speech and habitual apologies signal an internalized territorialization of the self. Eugene's religious absolutism legitimizes this domination by framing violence as moral discipline, echoing Cruz's critique of ideological systems that normalize occupation through narratives of order and righteousness. Through this sustained occupation, Beatrice is reduced from an autonomous subject to a contained body–territory, making her eventual act of resistance a radical moment of de-territorialization that reclaims space, body, and identity from patriarchal domination. Crucially, this act cannot be read as empowerment in a liberal feminist sense, instead, it represents what territorial feminism and Cruz identify as feminist survival, a desperate yet necessary rupture that enables continued existence within and beyond an otherwise totalizing regime of spatial, bodily, and ideological control.

If territorialization renders Beatrice's body and home as sites of occupation, then resistance must be understood not as conquest but as the painful work of making space liveable again. After prolonged confinement within a regime where violence is normalized and safety is systematically denied, the question is no longer one of empowerment or moral victory, but of survival itself. It is within this fragile threshold between endurance and annihilation that

Beatrice's final act must be located, not as an eruption of rage, but as an attempt to interrupt the logic of occupation and reconstitute the domestic sphere as a habitable territory.

> "They did an autopsy," she said. "They have found the poison in your father's body."
>
> She sounded as though the poison in Papa's body was something we all had known about, something we had put in there to be found, the way it was done in the books I read where white people hid Easter eggs for their children to find. "Poison?" I said.
>
> Mama tightened her wrapper, then went to the windows; she pushed the drapes aside, checking that the louvers were shut to keep the rain from splashing into the house. Her movements were calm and slow. When she spoke, her voice was just as calm and slow.
>
> "I started putting the poison in histea before I came to Nsukka.

This most twisted event in the novel shows Mama's confession as an act of reclaiming agency after years of domination. Her calm tone and deliberate movements contrast sharply with the violence of her admission, suggesting that the act was not impulsive but the result of prolonged control and fear. Papa's authority had transformed the home and Mama's body into an imposed territory where her actions, voice, and safety were tightly regulated. By poisoning him, she removes the force that defined and confined her existence. The ordinary way she speaks about the murder reflects how normalized suffering had become within that space, making the act feel less like cruelty and more like escape. Although morally complex, her action represents a decisive refusal to continue living within a system that denied her autonomy and humanity. Her calm and composed body language is deeply significant and suggests the psychological effects of long-term oppression. Rather than showing panic or guilt, her slow movements and controlled tone imply emotional exhaustion and detachment, as if she has already processed the violence long before speaking about it. This composure suggests that the act was a carefully considered response to sustained terror, not a moment of rage. It also reflects how living under constant control has trained her to regulate her emotions and remain

outwardly obedient, even when discussing something extreme. In this sense, her calmness is not peace but survival. It shows a woman who has learned to protect herself by suppressing visible emotion, signaling how deeply the authority she lived under shaped her body, behavior, and sense of self.

Within a territorial feminist framework, Beatrice's killing of Eugene can thus be read as an act of producing a safe territory, rather than an act of vengeance or empowerment. From the perspective of territorial feminism and Delmy Tania Cruz's concept of the body–territory, Eugene's death marks the removal of an occupying force that had rendered both the domestic space and Beatrice's body permanently unsafe. The home under Eugene is not merely abusive; it is a militarized territory, governed by surveillance, punishment, and ideological discipline. Safety, in this context, is not the absence of conflict but the absence of occupation. Eugene's death marks the removal of an occupying force that had rendered both the domestic space and Beatrice's body permanently unsafe. The home under Eugene is not merely abusive, it is a militarized territory**,** governed by surveillance, punishment, and ideological discipline. By killing Eugene, Beatrice dismantles the structure that continuously reproduces violence, transforming the home from a site of constant threat into a space where survival becomes possible. This act does not establish freedom or empowerment in a celebratory sense; instead, it creates the minimum condition for life, a territory no longer organized around fear, bodily harm, and moral policing**.**

This body territory framework helps clarify why this act must be understood spatially rather than morally. Since Beatrice's body had been treated as a territory to be corrected, punished, and controlled evident in the repeated miscarriages caused by violence, Eugene's authority constituted a permanent invasion. His removal therefore functions as a form of de-occupation**,** allowing Beatrice's body and the domestic space to cease being sites of sanctioned

violence. In this sense, killing Eugene is not an assertion of power but an act of spatial self-defence, aimed at restoring liveability rather than justice.

Importantly, this reading avoids romanticizing violence. Territorial feminism does not frame Beatrice's action as heroic or liberatory but as a tragic strategy of survival when all other forms of resistance, speech, exit, negotiation have been structurally foreclosed. The safe territory that emerges after Eugene's death is fragile, haunted by trauma and loss, yet it is the first space in which violence is no longer normalized. Thus, Beatrice's act signifies the creation of safety not as comfort or healing, but as the cessation of occupation, aligning her resistance with territorial feminism's insistence that survival itself can be a radical political outcome.

Eugene's regulation of religious space, which extends his authority beyond the home into the spiritual domain also shows another way of confronting his people. Prayer, confession, and religious observance are transformed into mechanisms of surveillance and discipline rather than sources of solace. Beatrice's faith is not a private or empowering territory, it is strictly policed, leaving her no autonomous spiritual space. From a territorial feminist perspective, this reflects how patriarchal power colonizes even intimate, internal territories, denying women refuge in belief or conscience. Beatrice's relationship to silence in the novel is another significant example to notice. Silence in the novel is not merely emotional withdrawal but a spatial strategy, an attempt to reduce visibility within a hostile territory. By minimizing her presence through quiet compliance, Beatrice negotiates survival within an unsafe environment. Territorial feminism helps us understand silence here not as passivity, but as a tactic employed by those living under occupation, where speaking can invite further violence.

Finally, as we analyse, the contrast between Beatrice's home and Aunty Ifeoma's house sharpens the novel's territorial logic. Ifeoma's home operates as a counter-territory, fluid, noisy, and emotionally open, where authority is shared rather than imposed. Beatrice's visible physical relaxation and emotional softening in this space suggest how safety is spatially

produced. The difference between these two homes demonstrates that violence in the novel is not inevitable or personal, but structured by the way territory is organized and controlled. Together, these instances reinforce the argument that *Purple Hibiscus* constructs safety and oppression through space. Beatrice's ultimate act of resistance must therefore be read as emerging from a sustained deprivation of safe territory, making her final decision not an isolated moral rupture but the culmination of a life lived under continuous spatial occupation.

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