

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: A Postcolonial Inquiry

Mohd Nageen Rather

The *Purple Hibiscus* (2013) is the debut novel by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, that was received with critical acclaim in literary circles all around the world. It is a bildungsroman novel set in the political context of a military coup in 1980's Nigeria. The present paper attempts to examine how the writer portrayed, through the medium of English, the destructive influences of post-colonialism to present to the world the awareness towards the traditions of Africa and its legacy that remained buried beneath the land of colonized Nigeria. For a thorough analysis of the selected text the qualitative research paradigm, guided by thematic textual analysis, has been used. The results show that *Purple Hibiscus*, as a post colonial text, critiques the associated violence of the colonial forces, religion, and patriarchal domination.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, Domination, Nigeria, Patriarchy, Postcoloniality.

Introduction

Purple Hibiscus narrates the internal struggles which Kambili suffers from, events around her life, her family and her society. The novel not only highlights the problems of living in neo-colonial world but also unravels the crises, religious, cultural and political, which continue to dominate a colony even after a country becomes independent. From the microcosm of domesticity to the macrocosm of a nation,

Adichie shows how the ideological damage done by the colonizer takes ages to overcome; the extremist zealotry produced by the religion of the colonizer sometimes ruins a family, hence the nation fully and irreparably. She also shows the post colonial legacy with the creation of the foil characters like Papa and Aunt Ifeoma and through the contrasting settings in Nsukka and Enugu as symbols to depict the myriad ranges of post-colonial effects on Nigeria.

Discussion

Purple Hibiscus, is a bildungsroman novel that chronicles the transformative journey of Kambili Achike, a young Nigerian girl. The novel has the strongest bildungsroman elements, showcasing Kambili's personal growth and the significance of education. Kambili's development throughout the narrative is central to the novel's bildungsroman form. Initially, she is timid and obedient, shaped by her father's oppressive presence. However, as the story unfolds, she starts questioning her father's authority and gradually discovers her own voice and identity. Her evolving relationship with her aunt, Ifeoma, acts as a catalyst for her growth. Ifeoma's encouragement and exposure to a more liberal way of life broaden Kambili's perspective, helping her break free from her father's control. Her growing bond with her cousin, Amaka, allows her to explore her artistic side. Amaka's free-spirited nature influences Kambili to express herself through art, enabling her to discover hidden talents and develop her individuality.

Education plays a pivotal role in Kambili's transformation, empowering her to challenge societal norms and fostering her personal and intellectual growth. Her enrollment at Nsukka University, where Aunt Ifeoma teaches, introduces her to a stimulating academic environment. The university becomes a space of intellectual freedom, where Kambili interacts with diverse perspectives and develops her critical thinking skills. Through education, she gains the confidence to articulate her thoughts and opinions. Her essays, which tackle topics such as political unrest, provide a platform for her to express her growing independence and to assert her own voice.

The title of the novel appears as a symbol of freedom, freedom to be and to do. Though hibiscus as a flower represents beauty, youth, growth and power, its colour purple signifies royalty. Therefore

this plant, though energetic, remains loyal to the place where it grows. In all the three locations mentioned in Nigeria, Enugu, Abba and Nsukka, hibiscus has a central position. The loyalty of this plant is drawn parallel to Eugene's (the devoted catholic) son, Jaja to the Nigerian land and culture. Though raised in a Christian missionary school, Jaja feels attracted to the traditional African culture, and hence tries to adopt the middle path. At aunt Ifeoma's garden when Kambili and Jaja see a purple hibiscus for the first time, Jaja feels quite attracted to it and remarks, "I didn't know there were purple hibiscuses" (129). With time Jaja feels more fascinated to them, and wraps stalks of them in black cellophane paper for their garden in Enugu. To Andre Kabore the plant "is a symbol of sought freedom" (36). This seems quite justifying because Jaja and his sister only feel comfortable at the Ifeoma's home, where these flowers grow, as they have a freedom there to enjoy their culture which they are deprived of in their home.

In the beginning of the novel, the contrast between the two cultures is established by "Palm Sunday", as it creates a division in the household of Eugene, thereby creating a controversy between him and his son Jaja, who doesn't want to attend the Communion. Jaja has missed Communion for no reason, being a devoted catholic, as the narrator, Kambili says,

Things started to fall apart at home. When my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere. We had just returned from church. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo (Adichie 4).

The flinging of the missal and breaking of the figurines hints to the end awaiting to the authoritarian rule of Eugene and the freedom of Beatrice respectively. Though a powerful influence outside, Eugene is able to make his son believe in Christianity and in all the traditions of Nigeria as barbaric. Jaja takes after his grandfather, who symbolizes the phase before colonialism, like his sister Kambili, as

they keep watching and loving his portrait. On the other hand Eugene, Jaga's father symbolizing colonial hybrid is disliked by his family, like he dislikes his father, and warns his children not to "in a postcolonial location" (Wallace 475). Though Kambili clears her doubts towards the end, the dubiousness of faith is retained by her brother Jaja, whose faith remains mysterious towards the end. He is neither purely an Igbo nor a Christian, rather he becomes a product of 'third space', ending in jail. Due to the exposure of two cultures he feels more of an agnostic. On their father's deaths, while talking of their father's death, when Kambili says "God knows best", Jaja makes fun of her, "Of course God does. Look what He did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son. But have you ever wondered why? Why did He have to murder his own son so we would be saved? Why didn't He just go ahead and save us?" (290). Though Jaja apparently doesn't believe in suffering and religion yet the role he chooses towards the end is quite religious in nature. After confessing a crime he doesn't commit, "Jaja sacrifices himself to redeem his mother, effectively stepping into the role of the Christ" (Wallace 478). At the same time, he also steps into the role of an Igbo son taking care of her widowed mother, a duty most sacred in Igbo culture. Therefore one is most confused what religion Jaja chooses.

Jaja becomes a typical example of Homi K Bhabha's "hybrid native" refusing "to return the cultural gaze", therefore he always finds himself "in a position of in-betweenness: between 'adopted' Englishness and 'original's Indianness" (Nayar 170). His father Eugene Achike is an ardent devotee of Catholicism and of the priest of their church, St. Agnes, named Father Benedict. In his childhood Jaja too sees his father as an idol until he visits his aunt, where he finds himself in altogether a different atmosphere among purple hibiscuses, as they would play chess together, and share everything. He "would hug Jaja" (40) and praise him on coming first in the class, and considering his grandfather Papa-Nnukuwu a "pagan" than a "traditionalist" (82).

In aunt Ifeoma's house, which is quite liberal, where he spends many days with his cousins and grandfather, Jaja is completely changed. He is especially influenced by his cousin Obiora. Unlike his house, he finds,

Laughter always rang out in Aunty Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping. Food had little meat, each person's piece the width of two fingers pressed close together and the length of half a finger. (140)

On his grandfather's death, Jaja feels much closer to him. He along with Obiora covers his body. When Jaja goes back to his house, Papa finds him completely transformed, therefore punishes him continuously which widens the gap between the two, which is climaxed when Jaja totally denies to attend communion as "the wafer" gives him "the bad breath" and feels nauseated with priest (7). This shift finally results in poisoning of Jaja's father by his mother to liberate herself as well as her children like the 'purple hibiscus'. Amidst all these transitions Jaja's personality transforms completely from a devoted Christian to a 'hybrid'.

The neocolonialism dominates the novel at two levels, at a national level as well as at the domestic level. Both are paralleled with violence and militarism. The coup military lays at the national level in the narrative "conjures up familiar incidents during the regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha, regimes reputed with the bureaucratization of murder" (Okuyade 251). Fighting against British colonialism, the freedom ensued in neo-colonial rule, where Igbo ruled together Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, holding all the resources for their personal use. Seeing this Igbo lays a military coup, followed by another coup by Hausa killing hundreds of people. Eugene Achike in the narrative is a sole voice fighting for a democratic rule, as he believes:

Military men would always overthrow one another, because they could, because they were all power drunk . . . the Standard had written many stories about the cabinet ministers who stashed money in foreign bank accounts, money meant for paying teachers' salaries and building roads. But what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. (25-26)

Therefore through his newspaper *The Standard* (I) he alone continuously criticizes the new "Head of state" (26), urging them to establish democracy, against all the papers which extolled the new leader. This leads to a change, as people start protesting for freedom, myriad "crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government square" (16). The courage and religious zealotry make Papa quite popular and is respected everything. However, Papa's political orientation comes to an end when the government destroys the Papa's press completely, thereby arresting Ade Coker, who is eventually killed.

At the domestic level neocolonial rule occurs through patriarchal means. Like he wants to direct political, Eugene Achicke tries his best to maintain religious orientation of his family. The worst victims of this domestic orientation, besides, his son and his wife are Beatrice, and daughter Kamibili. He, though apparently very religious, beats his wife continuously to blood, leading to her miscarriages, as Kambili says that they,

[S]tood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border. He opened the dining room door. Then we heard the front door open, heard him say something to the gate man, Adamu. "There's blood on the floor," Jaja said. "I'll get the brush from the bathroom." We cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolor all the way downstairs. (34)

He also beats his daughter and son more repeatedly. During her periods, when she feels the utmost pain her mother suggests Kamili to take Panadol and before that some little corn flakes to avoid stomach damage during the Eucharistic fast stealthily. When caught with "the few flaccid flakes floating among the clumps of milk" (102), her father beats them all even though her mother tells him that she has periods. He turned to Mama and said,

You sit there and watch her desecrate the Eucharistic fast, make nidi?" He unbuckled his belt slowly. It was a heavy belt. It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy se-

quined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back. (103)

Like his political orientation comes to an end when his associate is killed, Eugene Achike's domestic orientation also faces its end when he is poisoned by his wife out of helplessness.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie pertains to the cultural problem of female coercion, occurring in the 1960s when this novel came in existence. The novel plainly illustrates woman's poor rights and the battle they fight in order to be the part of a talking world. Rebecca Adami in her critical piece titled "On Subalternity and Representation: Female and Post Colonial Subjects Claiming Universal Human Rights in 1948" notes the inadequacy of women's right and her place as a voiceless subaltern, "... 'human' is contingent, that it has in the past and continues in the present to define a variable and restricted population, which may or may not include women" (59). The story dwells in such incidents where such exclusion is evident like in the incident of Mama's first miscarriage. One can hear, through Kambili, the harrowing creaks of male dominance as she is dragged down the steps. The novelist exhibits that in the Achike home, Papa is showing supremacy over Mama, who is delegate of all women in Nigeria, excluding the mere existence of subaltern. The 'blood' from the scene is the stark symbol of the suffering women. They are victimized on account of their origins and by the men who accompany them. Another instance of a similar situation is seen on the day outing when they catch sight of the mmuo spirits with Papa Nnukwu, as Ifeoma and him argue over her missionary upbringing which is connected to the chronological context of colonialism. Papa Nnukwu says that she 'does not count' and this angers self-sufficient Ifeoma. She denounces him for saying this. Adichie tries to highlight that a powerful woman such as Ifeoma is not there to accept suppression without combat and resistance.

Secondly, she is showing the historical context and indicates that a traditionalist father who has a 'mischief' to his phrases will see women as insignificant with a tinge of sarcasm but not without some certainties too because in ancient period the women were disregarded more ruthlessly.

Lastly, when Kambili is cajoled by the Umunna she is remembered to be ready for a 'suitor', on the other hand, in disparity Jaja is cooed over more, with women saying that they will 'sell you my daughter'. Adichie is showing that women were just like commodities that had a value to be purchased and traded like a fruit on a booth, proposing that women were worthless and lame. Nonetheless, in the end of the novel, Adichie gives an ironic twist to her story, making women the successor against aggressive and unruly men. Louai notes the view of Gayatri Spivak in her essay called "Can Subaltern Speak?" It is not the question of the ground rules of the sexual division of labor or the female participation in insurgency, for both of which there is strong evidence; rather the point is that both were used as object of colonialist historiography and were also used as a subject of insurgency, However, the ideological construction of gender retains the male as dominant one. In the context of colonial production, if the subaltern has no history and they can't speak, the subaltern, in the status of female, is even more deeply in shadow (7).

The incidents from the novel mentioned earlier give a better picture of this "shadow", Adichie further attempted to wave it away with certain other notions. One such event in particular which delineates such attitude to women is evident from the fact that Adichie used the first person narrative technique to make Kambili listen to / on Mama's and Ifeoma conversation. Through this scene, Adichie portrays the two starkly opposite women through a characterized dialogue. The reader gains an understanding of their two dilemmas and the fact that they both see eye to eye on most of the subjects. Nonetheless, Mama rejects Ifeoma's words as 'university talk', thus bringing out the cultural distance between the two women; and that Mama believes a man is essential to life which is and Roman Catholic and a very traditional view i.e, it is the man who is the center of the family. But, Ifeoma is a strong, independent woman flaunting 'shiny lipstick', a metaphor for her flamboyant and 'larger than life' character. It also suggests that it is highly possible to thrive in Nigeria without a male accomplice. The word 'Shiny' is significant as it suggests that she can prosper and sparkle in life even without a husband.

In the novel, there is no doubt that men are the seemingly

domineering over women as they oppress them both in humorous and scarring ways, Adichie unexpectedly and strangely makes almost all the men die in the due course of time. Papa Nnukwu dies by old age, Papa by the hand of his own wife, and Ade Coker dies in political unrest. All these deaths of the men suggest and represent the strength of the females. We get to know that Ifeoma's stands firm as iron against the political unrest within the university. The strong defiance by Kambili despite her narrow future, and finally how Mama manages to show her ability to murder Papa and attain the power to become the superior party in the relationship.

Conclusion

Purple Hibiscus is an brilliant criticism of post-colonial Nigeria that lays bare the harrowing effects of the period of European colonialization. Adichie, with the help of the creation of foil characters, the settings that serve as symbols and also with the depiction of Kambili's internal struggles, effectively delineates the effects of post-colonial legacy, depicting how Nigerians such as Papa and Kambili are in constant pursuit to get their Nigerian identity in the face of these post-colonial impacts that continue to dictate their everyday lives. Even after the freedom, people remain colonized subjects both at the domestic level and national level; however instead of foreign people they are exploited by their own people, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes out of greed. The generation which undergoes a change in its culture especially, in its religion under the colonial rule, is never able to fix and situate itself among past and future generations; it becomes as exotic as the colonizer itself.

Works Cited:

- Adani, R. (2015). On Subalternity and Representation: Female and Post Colonial Subjects Claiming Universal Human Rights. *Journal of Research on Women and Gender*, 6, 55-66.
- Adichie, C. N. (2003). Purple Hibiscus. Alhoquin Books.
- Kabore, A. (2013). The Symbolic Use of Palm, Figurines and Hibiscus in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. *Linguistic and Literature Studies*, 5(2), 32-36.
- Louai, E. H. (2012). Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical Developments and New Applications. *African Journal of History and Culture*, 4(1), 4-8.
- Nayar, P. K. (2010). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. Pearson.
- Okuyade, O. (2009). Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2(9), 245-259.
- Wallace, C. R. (2012). Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Purple Hibiscus' and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Redemption. *Christianity and Literature*, 6(3), 465-483.

Mohd Nageen Rather

Ph.D Research Scholar

Madhyanchal Professional University

Bhopal

Pin: 462044

India

Email: rathernageen7@gmail.com

Ph: +91 7889771233

ORCID: 0000-0002-2517-2445