

# **Beyond the Odds of the Red Hibiscus: A Critical Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

by

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*But my memories did not start at Nsukka. They started before, when all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a startling red. (Purple Hibiscus, 16)*

## **Abstract**

Fiction in Africa has taken a new turn with the production of realities in factional modes. The need to tell the story from the 'inside' could have been one of the reasons for these significant literary productions. In Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Adichie, there is a critical presentation of the oddities in Nigeria as well as Africa in general, as the continent trudges in the biting tyrannical trauma of the military and anarchical leaderships. This aspect is x-rayed beyond the micro setting (families) to the macro society (countries) as the inhabitants, represented by the naïve Kambili, perceive unruly torture in their experience of governance. We see a novel that reassesses what Izevbaye (1979) expresses as "the civilizing function which literature performs by tearing down the veil of sophisticated drawing room manners and fashionable clothes... dealing with the African image in the past or the politics of the present" (African Literature Today 10, 14). This paper examines how Chimamanda Adichie has unraveled the problems of politics, freedom, gender and development within the threshold of governance in Africa.

## Introduction

Charles Nnolim (2005)<sup>1</sup> explains critically that the third generation of writers in Nigeria (which includes Adichie) exhibits “a literary jungle- rich with varieties of life and growth, awe-inspiring and full of breath-taking surprises...” (8). This is not far from a description of Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus. Adichie presents series of fictional surprises as she consciously romances between history and art. The need to expose the traumatic situation in Africa has often occupied the minds of modern day writers in Africa. Helon Habila’s Waiting for An Angel and Okey Ndibe’s Arrows of Rain represent another critical fiction examining the same odds as Adichie did. The protest voices are raised in Africa against bad governance in different forms but the realities become much more biting and the writers adjust their ‘pens’ to accommodate the excesses. Having told this tale in various forms, the need to get truly out of these ‘scenes’ and tell a true tale of the true situation prompted the emergence of Kambili. She is a new voice crying out to be heard because of the torture and anguish in the impediments of governance and civilization around her. One needs to observe, surprisingly though, how this naïve character reveals in somewhat innocent ‘silence’, the painful realities in her society. The use of the growing character technique enables Adichie to achieve historical exposition of the trauma in African society. One observes with keenness, the narrative stance of the dumb character that exposes several military oddities with the eyes of an innocent observer. One observes this clearly when Kambili asserts:

*I lay in bed after mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips... Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one crowd the crowds waving green leaves chanted... A freedom to be, to do. (Purple Hibiscus, 16)*

The need for African people to experience true freedom becomes Kambili’s preoccupation. This reveals the expected thoughts of the people about the way forward in their political trauma. While this narration flows from a child who is battling with religious and domestic problems in her home, one still observes the sincere reference to the macro oddities in the society. This novel tries to question rigidity in religion and wrong upbringing of children in a modern world that should allow room for dynamism and freedom.

## Motif of Freedom in the Novel

Kambili uses the draconic ruling pattern of his father, Chief Eugene Achike, to reveal the problems in the entire society. Rushdie (1991) sees this type of people (Kambili's father) as "translated men" who get things mixed up because of obstinacy and the translation of values (17). The unnecessary religious conflicts that make Kambili's father to hate Papa Nnukwu; her grand father shows the high-handedness of some African people who use religion as a means of creating discord in their families. This also serves as an attack on those leaders in Africa who allow religious sentiments to create problems in the country. The religious riots in the northern part of Nigeria and the neglect of African values and culture are attacked. This dichotomy also affects the general lives of the people even within close-knitted families. Kambili explains thus about her grandfather on a close encounter:

*I had examined him that day, too, looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of indifference, of Godlessness. I didn't see any, but I was sure they were there somewhere. They had to be. (63)*

The child in Kambili questions the unnecessary prohibitions from her father which deprives them of the love and knowledge they would have acquired from the sage. Auntie Ifeoma's children enjoy so much of this sage. They live in the atmosphere of freedom. Freedom of speech. Freedom of association. Freedom of decision. Freedom of religion. Uncle Eugene allows religion to becloud his sense of fellowship with his culture and society. His children must comply with the tenets of Catholicism. They must not mingle with the 'heathen' society. They must not romance with non-catholic churches as they constitute the fall of man. They must comply with this 'time table' which almost looks like a ritual of daily living:

*Kambili was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet paper, just as Jaja was written on the schedule above Jaja's desk in his room. I wondered when Papa would draw up a schedule, for the baby, my new brother, if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order. (22)*

This sounds almost derogatory. The time-table seems like a dogma, a very displeasing anarchy that redirects reasoning towards the merciful hands of 'strict order'. It becomes surprising that a man who fights for the political freedom of his people through his journalistic ventures could apply what he attacks in his home.

All the daring challenges, his editor, Ade Coker ( a character representation of Dele Giwa, the murdered editor of News Watch Magazine) throws at the military government reveals him as a man who decries anarchy in the society while he consciously practices the same ill within his homestead. He engages in children and wife battery but criticizes those who batter the society. It looks like denying a phenomenon and embracing it at the same time. A paradox! He celebrates the relief that comes from coups believing that a new government means freedom in sight. He expects freedom but blocks it from his vicinity.

Kambili sees the contrast between her father and the military government when she critical asserts, “of course, Papa told us, the politicians were corrupt..., what we needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. *Renewed Democracy*. It sounded important, the way he said it...” (25). This whole dream sounded as if Kambili is expecting a ‘renewed approach’ to the family affairs first before hoping for a renewed governance in the country. Adichie explains that the issue of governance in Africa would change when the individuals begin to examine within themselves the correct approaches to life that would enhance the development of good governance just as Achebe echoed that “what we need to do is to look back and find out where we went wrong, where the rain began to beat us” (*Morning Yet On Creation Day*, 43). Thus, the micro problems and corrections pave way for the macro direction and correction.

Love thrives where freedom blossoms. Kambili and Jaja never experienced ‘real’ love beyond the sipping of their father’s hot tea as Kambili cries out that, “the tea was always hot, always burned my tongue, and if lunch was something peppery, raw tongue suffered” (8). It was Auntie Ifeoma’s home that provided the needed environment for them to experience love. Jaja falls in love with flowers and other chores. He expresses himself to his cousins. He visits scenes and places and exchanges gifts and experiences. He sees the love of a ‘heathen’ grandfather who tells them moral folk tales and the love of a reverend father who provides the needed atmosphere for peace and joy. Kambili sees the love of a sister who teaches her to cook meals, care for others and accommodate people around her. She ‘falls in love’ with Father Amadi. Father Amadi sees in Kambili the character of a heroine who talks less but acts more in her mind, “she does not waste her energy in picking never-ending arguments. But there is a lot going on in her mind, I can tell.” (173)

The love between Father Amadi and Kambili almost goes canal. Both of them realize that love is the passageway to freedom. Kambili plays, talks and thinks affection because she sees a new ray of hope that breaks the silence in her rigid and fragile home at Enugu. Interestingly, Kambili and Father Amadi never consummate their love because of the long drawn barriers of religion and naivety but Amaka and Obiora rightly observe this unholy affection between them. Amaka says, “Obiora says you must be having sex, or something close to sex, with Father Amadi. We have never seen Father Amadi look so bright-eyed” (281). Amaka further mocks Kambili by saying, “Or may be fornication should be permitted all priests once in a while. Say, once a month” and concluded critically by asking her, “Do you want him to leave priesthood?” (281).

According to Mutiso (1974), politics in literature is a healthy phenomenon because good literatures in the present Africa aim to, “extrapolate the major social and political concepts that will be used for the socialization of present and future generations” (244). Politics therefore becomes a necessary tool in the craft of modern African fiction. Adichie sees the African people as sufferers of bad governance due to many years of military rulership. Political freedom is almost a dream in most African states. Political freedom seems a long sought- after need of the Nigerian people. Adichie takes a historical stance in the exposition of the travails of military oddities in the novel. Ade Coker fights the military regime through the *Standard* newspaper. Uncle Eugene sees the fight as his needed role in the correction of military anarchy. Auntie Ifeoma flees the country to the United States in search of peace and academic freedom. Brain drain increases daily. Later, Ade Coker is murdered. Nwankiti Ogechi (a typology for Ken Saro Wiwa) is murdered:

*Soldiers shot Nwankiti Ogechi in a bush in Minna. And then they poured acid on his body to melt his flesh off his bones, to kill him even when he was already dead. (200-201)*

Minna is the homestead of the longest ruling dictator in Nigeria. It is a toponym that represents the anarchy by the rulers. After this killing, commonwealth countries suspended Nigeria and imposed sanctions. The Big Oga later dies “atop a prostitute, foaming at the mouth and jerking-...” (297). The Big Oga, invariably General Sani Abacha, is revealed as the ending point of Nigeria’s military rule. His death and the death of Uncle Eugene bring in a new hope, a dawn, to the polity.

Jaja's acceptance of the crime of murdering his father, even though his mother had claimed responsibility, shows the yearning of the family to get freedom from the brutal and strict father, just like the needed respite the Nigerian nation experienced with the exit of the dictator, General Sani Abacha. Jaja's prison experiences can not be compared with the emotional, physical and psychological trauma they suffered from their rigid father. The symbol of the purple hibiscus bringing a new hope in their home is seen in Kambili's new vision of tomorrow: "I reach out and place my arm around mama's shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles...The new rains will come soon (307). The political colour in the novel has helped to expose and satirize the excesses of modern dictators as Izevbaye (1979) puts it, "...the African novel has been directly influenced by politics, especially in the descriptions of the change of mood from cultural imperialism...to the satire of the years after independence"(24) According to Heather (2003):

*The purple hibiscus becomes a metaphor for freedom and independence. While a flower may seem delicate in constitution, purple is historically associated with royalty and the divine. The purple flower then comes to signify Kambili's urge to bloom, her natural instinct to look for the light.(1)*

### **Gender Motif in the Novel**

Many critics have not been able to observe the feministic paradigm in this novel. Kambili may have been a very little girl but she sees the tight cultural tones that have deprived women from attaining certain rights in her vicinity. It is clear from the on-set that she plays a second fiddle. Her position in the family is not highly –placed by her father as Jaja is placed. Uncle Eugene is often interested in what Jaja utters and feels proud to have such a son. Jaja and Kambili are the only children in the family, but like the typical African man in search of more children, Uncle Eugene expects that his wife should bear more children. Adichie revisited the issue of children as determinant of marriage in Africa. Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta<sup>2</sup> have presented this issue severally in their works. Adichie (2004) deliberately present 'bad marriage' situations as she says, "I do have what I think is a healthy skepticism about marriage, indeed about most social institutions..., but bad marriages really make for more interesting reading than good ones, don't they?"(4). Aunty Beatrice, Kambili's mum, almost lost her marriage to willing women who would have taken over her marriage because of her several miscarriages many years after the birth of Kambili:

*The members of the umunna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates, too. They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr. Ezendu's second wife did. But your father stayed with me, with us... (20)*

Amaka is also a strong voice. She seems to be one of the strongest female voices in our contemporary fiction. Amaka refuses to take an English name for her confirmation because she sees no need for such 'colonial' necessity. She was never forced to accept this 'necessity'. Not even from Father Amadi whose closeness to the family ought to have given the necessary touch for Amaka to choose an English name:

*"I told you I am not taking an English name, father," she said  
"And have I asked you why?"  
"Why do I have to?"  
"Because it is the way it's done. Let's forget if it's right or wrong for now," father Amadi said, and I noticed the shadows under his eyes.  
"When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Shouldn't we moving ahead?" (271-272)*

Amaka represents the new hope for the coming generation of African women. Unlike the acclaimed hopes of African women as seen in Ihuoma and Nnu Ego<sup>3</sup>, Amaka seems to be the most vocal of these characters: young, resilient, outspoken and unbending in the things that touch her African pride. Kambili describes her thus: "She walked and talked even faster and with more purpose than Auntie Ifeoma did" (78). She is a rare breed of the new generation of youths. She is creative, accommodating, honest, outspoken and a dogged fighter. Kambili's silence represents the restless silence of the African people in their inability at challenging those things that trample on the personality of African peoples. Even when Amaka left the country with her mother, she never stops her protests against those things she finds unpalatable in the Nigerian society. Kambili tells us that:

*Amaka used to write to the office of the head of state, even the Nigerian Ambassador in America, to complain about the poor state of Nigeria's justice system. She said nobody acknowledged the letters but still it was important to her that she do something. (300)*

Aunty Ifeoma is a hard fighter. She never believed her elder brother's unnecessary hard-line attitude towards their father. She never believed that a woman must depend on men for her future to have meaning. She has had rugged experiences since she lost her husband many years ago. This experience prepared her for the future. She fearlessly worked her way out of the university. She fought with all her breath against the injustices of the military dictators in her country. She is Amaka's motivator and model. She is a sharp contrast from Aunty Beatrice, very resolute and independent minded. She says,

*Six girls in my first-year seminar class are married, their husbands visit in Mercedes and Lexus cars every weekend, their husbands buy them stereos..., and when they graduate their husbands own them and their degrees... (77)*

She does not believe that marriage is unnecessary but she expects that marriage should give the woman some measure of independence. By this, masculinity will be made slightly irrelevant. Acholonu (1995) says "masculinity or male chauvinism is really a disease of the present generation..., which unfortunately is spilling over to infest women" (109). Aunty Ifeoma feels that her elder brother's unnecessary imposition of rules is unbecoming. How can a man be so hard on his father, wife and children in the name of discipline and religion? She never agrees with Uncle Eugene in his excesses.

From a very vantage angle, it is possible to regard Aunty Ifeoma as a Womanist. She represents the women who act within the dictates of cultural values to permeate their belief about love, relationships and the essence of human values. As a motherist, she guides and directs her family towards accepted values. Acholonu (1995) emphasizes unequivocally that:

*The motherist does not dominate nature; the ecosystem, his fellow man, rather he observes, seeks to understand and co-operates. A motherist is courageous, yet humble, powerful yet down to earth, fatherly yet as a mother to the core...for no matter his/her age or sex, the motherist is essentially a mother (113)*

In every inch, Aunty Ifeoma is a mother to the core. She manages her home in her little way never depending on the wealth of her elder brother, as other widows would have done. She was contented with her little salary. Even Kambili is surprised at the way she manages her home out of nothing. Her children are always happy and contented with whatever they are given.



Kambili sees a better family and her psychology seems to prick her that their wealth may have an inhibitor of freedom. Like Nnu Ego, Auntie Ifeoma is independent minded. Both are motherists but Auntie Ifeoma lacks the pride which Nnu Ego exhibits. Ifeoma seems an educated version of Nnu Ego but each of them has succeeded in the midst of nothing to build their homes independently beyond the odds of their societies.

### **The Motif of Innocence**

Kambili seems a naïve but functional voice in the revelation of realities. Yes, Adichie achieves a striking success in creating a sensitive character in Kambili; she neatly tucks away the sensationalism that the other 'new' writers would have flooded their works with; and she depersonalizes herself from the work thus lifting her work from the slump of personal social commentary as most of our novels are. Heather (2003) captures her innocence thus:

*Kambili is like a war correspondent embedded within her own family, anesthetized to the violence and familial masochism (loving hurt, hurting love) that create a constant tightrope the characters must walk. This consistency and reliability of first-hand account helps create the emotional authenticity and airtight atmosphere. (1)*

Again, the innocent voice draws in limitation of facts. She has a limit to her exposure. In the house, Kambili and Jaja eavesdrop to be able to get facts about the society, politics, journalism and even family matters. Kambili is not a contributor character. She never acted to change neither her situation nor the situation of things around her. Like the proverbial child in a folktale, she must not talk or else she would evoke the wrath of a wicked father whose main love is a sip of hot tea and peppery soup. What we see in Eugene Adichie's family is bonded home without life, almost not a home, because singing a song to God is ungodly. Like a helpless child who admires the situation she can not change, Kambili accepts whatever she is told to accept and reject whatever is not acceptable by her father. Jaja seems dumb. Kambili chooses to talk about him as non issue except that he is the first son and deserves recognition. Her father even acknowledged this fact and tries to tread with caution while dealing with Jaja. May be, a mature voice would have exposed all these beyond the little world view of Kambili.

Kambili's silence is louder than Amaka's loudness. One expresses much in the heart more than with the lips. At a point, Amaka becomes aggrieved with Kambili's silence and at a point we sense fear between them. There is the fear of the unknown and of extreme reasoning. Kambili does not talk but enjoys the company of Father Amadi. Amaka talks but detests the company of Father Amadi. Something dangerous lingers among them but at each point Kambili's silence quenches the supposed trauma expected and at another point her silence breeds hatred for her. Jaja seems indifferent while creating time for just flowers and freedom. He is defiant of the things around or may be Kambili makes him to appear so. He reacts only when Kambili reacts.

The motif of innocence helps Adichie to achieve concrete realism devoid of exaggerations. In the world of the child, details are hardly seen but truth is hardly compressed. All these are seen in Purple Hibiscus. It is a novel shrouded in the reality of odds and the pains of anarchy.

### **Conclusion**

The ethics of human relationship emphasizes the correction of odds and the actualization of truth. Adichie draws from the sociological front, the idea of exposing the odds as a way of effecting the truth. History is not left out. It becomes a tool for the perfection of the craft. Drawing from history brings in the much desired truth. Politics is a necessary human quality but Adichie sees the misapplication of politics as the bane of governance. The unnecessary parental caging affects the minds of children. The motif of politics in the novel examines governance as an individual problem. The family gets better and the society gets better. Religion should be a guide not a prison wall. We see in this novel a very trying attempt at creating what Iroegbu (2005)<sup>3</sup> calls in philosophical terms, 'globalised ethics' and further explains, "a globalised ethics is thus both a reality and a project, yet to be fully achieved" (21).

The need to refine the odd politics, the odd cultures, odd religious dogma and tortuous home training of children constitutes this global war as reflected in this novel. The long drawn war of the chauvinists in Africa (though more of a cultural thing) is revisited in the novel. The unnecessary importance placed on male children, the place of education in women elevation and the effects of motherhood is espoused. We have these four paradigms of focus in the thematic structure of the novel:

1. Politics: Greed, anarchy, violence, brutality, injustice, murder
2. Religion: hatred, violence, culture clash, dogma imposition
3. Gender: discrimination, hatred, cultural laws, brutality
4. Ethics: harsh upbringing, wife battery, conflicts, moral development

One sees the effects of each of these issues examined in the novel and each of the effects results in a dangerous phenomenon. As shown above, each odd situation or revelation results in hard traumas. The coups and killings result out of bad governance. Attacks and killings result from religion and gender. Murder results from ethical misappropriation. The novel is embedded with complex webs of odds and each odd unfolds with painful realism.

The style of innocence is a new voice that captures reality completely and less distortedly. Adichie tries in this choice of a growing and silent child technique as a proper model for a serious exposition of the traumatic experiences of Nigerian and/or African nations. It is not just the odds of the red hibiscus because the purple hibiscus also brings in a new ray of hope and ideology in the family, the nation, the society and in the renewed psyche of the African minds. The most troubling question here still remains: Must freedom come in the web of murder?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Professor Charles Nnolim in a recent paper titled “New Nigerian Writing: Between Debauchery and the Kitchen” presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Imo ANA Conference held in Owerri on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of July, 2005, emphatically stated that the third generation of Nigerian writers, which he pegged between the years 2000 to 2005, as writers that lack clearly defined thematic focus. However, he sees these writers writing about a people adrift, hedonistic, and cowed by the long incursion of the military in the body politic. This may sound controversial but this gloomy picture is clearly presented in Purple Hibiscus.

<sup>2</sup>Flora Nwapa in Efuru and Buchi Emecheta Joys of Motherhood present two strong female characters whose inability to bear children almost cost them their marital dignity. There is the cultural colour in this issue. The essence of the male child has been long debated in most cultures in Africa. Adichie reemphasizes this phenomenon.

<sup>3</sup>Ihuoma in Elechi Amadi’s The Concubine and Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood have been presented by some critics of African literature, as very strong voices representing the African women.

<sup>4</sup>Pantaleon Iroegbu, the proponent of ‘Kpim Philosophy’ emphasizes that the world will be better when truth and discipline are handled in consideration of human values. He says that a globalised ethics will enhance the essence of doing good and enforces good governance. Adichie rightly pictures the essence of this view in this touching story.

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