

## THE BLACK AND WHITE OF POSTCOLONIAL NIGERIA IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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### **Abstract**

*The paper will examine the effect of violence and silence in the novel Purple Hibiscus by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Winner of the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award for Debut Fiction in 2004, the novel is set against the backdrop of the military coup and Civil War in postcolonial Nigeria. Narrated by the 15-year-old protagonist, Kambili, the novel interweaves the themes of a lost childhood, religious intolerance, oppression silence and domestic violence amidst the impact of colonialism in Nigeria. It is a coming-of-age novel, portraying the trials and tribulations faced by a young girl hampered by religious fundamentalism, and her journey towards literally finding her voice and achieving self-expression while realising her self-worth and identity. The internal world of the family and the external world of Nigerian politics collide in the novel to derail the sense of peace that a growing child needs. It is only with a change in the environment that takes place with Kambili moving to another town that some semblance of peace is achieved.*

**Key Words:** Postcolonialism, Violence, War, Religion, Fundamentalism, Silence, Language, Hope, Freedom

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- Anjali N Singh

Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, follows the paths of fifteen-year-old Kambili and her older brother Chukwuka (Jaja) Achike through a childhood filled with violence – both physical and mental, at their home in Enugu. The opening lines of the novel hurtle the reader straight into the battleground that is tied to religion and the shape it has taken in postcolonial Nigeria. '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 étagère' (3). Set in postcolonial Nigeria that is beset with political instability, the novel is narrated by a grown-up Kambili who struggles to find her voice under the authoritarian rule of her father, Eugene Achike. Pushed to the margins at the start of the book, Kambili and Jaja finally overcome their silence, and from being mere passive observers and victims, are awakened to find their voice and identify themselves in their new role as Nigeria's future in a postcolonial chaos riddled with warring indigenous, military and democratic forces. The siblings are also locked in a religious crisis between Catholic extremism and native Igbo faith.

With the coming of the Christian missionaries, the indigenous faith of the Igbo people was overturned and the subsequent generation, following Catholicism, came to be at war with their parents who continued with their old rituals. While Papa Nnukwu, lives at a very short distance from his son, Eugene's house in their hometown, he is not allowed to interact with them as a family member owing to his not converting to Catholicism. Eugene calls his father a 'heathen' forbidding any contact with him and even when Papa Nnukwu dies, he does not go to his funeral as the cremation would not be as per Catholic Christian rites. His interpretation of religion allows him to wear a mantle of hypocrisy. To him, religion is a power play that offers him a sense of supremacy. As Frantz Fanon suggests in his seminal book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 'The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.' (18)

Adichie draws several parallels and allegories between the growth and development of Kambili and Jaja with the growth and development of Nigeria. Both the children, as well as the newly-

independent country, are striving to overcome the inherent silence amidst the violence, and create their own identity. As Madeline Hron suggests, 'the child's quest for a sociocultural identity is inextricably linked to issues arising from postcolonialism and globalization'. (27) Kambili and Jaja's innocence is ripped apart by several opposing forces in their lives—indigenous and colonial, Pagan and Christian, and Nigerian and British. Just like the state of Nigeria, their lives are also in a state of transition. While Papa Nnukwu serves as a metaphor for the old cultural heritage of Nigeria, Eugene is shaped by the colonising powers and endeavours to ensure that his children become his mirror image. His is an attempt to replace the indigenous culture with that of the colonial. Frantz Fanon, in the *Wretched of the Earth* writes, 'Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.' (149) The colonists proclaimed that their culture was superior and the ideal culture for the natives to imitate. They used violence to divide and conquer as well as suppress the natives. To this end, Eugene decides the minutist details of his children's lives and controls them without sparing the rod. He pours boiling hot water over Kambili's legs and even beats her up so violently that she has to be hospitalised. Eugene's violence also causes three miscarriages and confers intense physical and psychological pain on his wife, Beatrice.

The atmosphere at home is so oppressive that the children can only speak in the language of silence. Eugene's violence has stolen the voices of the family members. They are not allowed to be eloquent. It is ironic that Kambili who is the narrator is an oppressed and censored silent observer in the book. The silence is strange and thick and Kambili feels 'suffocated' by it. (7) It also carries multiple meanings—from 'being silenced' the children choose to 'become silent'. The former is imposed while the latter is shared. The moments of shared silence between the oppressed create a new narrative—a narrative of resilience and resistance. It is a counter narrative and is reflected in the author's perception. Adichie enumerates three different ways of resilience to counter the violence faced by the three members of the family. While Beatrice uses violence to counter violence and kills Eugene by poisoning him, Jaja's refusal to go to Communion and even sit down for a shared family dinner is his way of rebelling against years of violence that had till then been met by stoic silence. With Kambili's refusal to return to her home and instead go to Nsukka, she finally finds her voice, both literally and figuratively.

Fanon also questions whether violence as a tactic should be employed to eliminate colonialism and whether natives who have adopted western methods of thought and urge slow decolonization are in fact part of the same nexus of control that the colonizer employs to exploit the colonized. He calls

for a radical break with colonial culture and exalts violence as a necessary pre-condition for this rupture.

Violence is treated as a regular occurrence in the Achike household. In her essay, *Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as a Character in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*, Ogaga Okuyade recounts,

‘When Kambili narrates the issues of spouse beating, she does so with a sense of ordinariness and opacity that one can hardly describe Eugene’s home as a domestic war zone. From her narrative it seems as if spouse beating is a normal phenomenon’. (249)

The children have become desensitized to the violence and choose to remain silent and afraid of any retribution should they speak out. Kambili, especially, has become paralyzed by fear and struggles to speak. She stutters and her replies are usually mumbles. Violence and silence, thus, emerge as two sides of the same coin—one appears to follow the other.

While Eugene is a symbol of autocratic colonialism, Auntie Ifeoma, standing in sharp contrast to her brother Eugene is, according to Peters, a representative of ‘the democratic option for Nigeria’s imagined future’. (5) Her style of parenting marks a complete contrast to that followed by Eugene. Unlike her brother, she encourages and allows her children enough freedom to form their own opinions, have different points of view and follow their own ambitions. Her daughter, Amaka, also stands as a point of contrast against Kambili. She has been brought up by her mother to use her talents and skills and is made to feel an important part of the family, and her brother, Obiora, although is three years younger than Jaja, has gone through his ‘Rite of Manhood’, which is part of the Igbo culture, and has taken on the role of the man in his mother’s house. Jaja too wants to protect his mother and his younger sister from the violence inflicted by his father. In Nsukka, Jaja comes into his own in the nurturing environment effected by Auntie Ifeoma. Her style of parenting is symbolised by the flowers in her garden, the purple hibiscus.

“That’s a hibiscus, ain’t it, Auntie?” Jaja asked, staring at a plant close to the barbed wire fence. “I didn’t know there were purple hibiscuses.” Auntie Ifeoma laughed and touched the flower, colored a deep shade of purple that was almost blue. “Everybody has that reaction the first time.” (128)

Jaja's outlook undergoes a sea change. He attains freedom and for the first time in life breaks free from the shackles and rules set by his father refusing to partake in the Holy Communion. Kambili likens his new sense of defiance as 'fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup'. (16) Just like the indigenous population fighting against the colonial oppressor, Jaja defies and challenges Eugene. In a way it can be seen as an attempt by the colonised to take back some semblance of power from the coloniser. This is however, unacceptable to Eugene and thus, 'when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything'. (15) The autonomy wielded by the oppressor is destabilised. Later in the novel, when Eugene is poisoned and murdered by his wife, Beatrice, it manifests the latent anger of the colonised towards the colonising power and symbolises an attempt to overthrow the ruler. However, Jaja has to pay a heavy price for this new-found freedom. He is sent to prison for three years when he lies to save his mother and claims that it is he who has murdered his father. He takes on the blame for Beatrice, who has killed Eugene by poisoning his tea over a period of time.

With the death of both, the cultural past with Papa Nnukwu and the postcolonial present with Eugene, the mantle rests on Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi to shape a potential future. Father Amadi is the young pastor at the Catholic Church in Nsukka and is the inverted image of Father Benedict, a religious zealot in Enugu. He stands in sharp contrast to the Catholic religion propagated and enforced by Eugene and Father Benedict, and bridges the gap between the two extremes of religion—the extremism of Father Benedict and the traditionalism of Papa Nnukwu. While Father Benedict is a white man from England who conducts the ceremonies of religion in European tradition, Father Amadi blends Catholicism with Igbo faith and traditions, and straddles the cultural past as well as the present with his songs that are sung in both, Igbo and English. He is able to draw Kambili out of her silent shell. Initially, she is unable to communicate easily with him.

Peters suggests that Kambili is so 'indoctrinated in her father's brand of Christianity (and way of life) that she cannot mould herself to Father Amadi's way of living'. (2) This form of extremism in religion allows for excessive violence and does not take into cognizance any other religion—it subverts and takes over the faith practiced by the traditional Igbo people and intends to turn them into mere caricatures of Europeans. Their language is also denigrated. As Kambili says, 'We had to sound civilized in public. We had to speak English.' (60) Homi Bhabha's notions of 'Hybridity' and 'Mimicry' elaborated in *The Location of Culture*, find application in this context when he suggests that

hybridity results from various forms of colonization, which lead to cultural collisions and interchanges. In the attempt to assert colonial power and create anglicized subjects, ‘the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid’. (111)

Steeped in a society that is facing the reverberations of postcolonialism, the novel brings out the overzealous nature of the ‘white man’s’ religion and depicts how it is allowed to subvert the balance in society. Eugene becomes a poster child for showcasing the after-effects of colonialism. According to Deler Singh in the *American International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences*, ‘One of the notions that the colonial masters introduced into the education system was that boys are superior to girls and supposed to lead the family.’ (118) Further, he believes that:

This gender bias supported and reinforced the notion that women were weaklings and that they could be treated violently. In a society which already permitted wife battering and violence against women in the name of ‘family matters’, such notions only degraded the status of women further. (118)

Through Kambili and Beatrice, and the excessive violence shown by Eugene towards them, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie exposes the warps and the wefts showing the disrespect and extreme prejudice towards women. She brings out the oppressive nature of religion on the individual. Some observers attribute the blame for this violence against women to an alleged ‘culture of violence’, which allows violence as an accepted way to resolve disputes, linking it to a colonial legacy, when the Africans were treated violently by the colonisers. In *Africa’s Women Speak Out*, Adichie associates,

These prejudices and tendencies with Christian values which colonials propagated in order to prove their superiority. Many of their teachings were in total contrast to the native African ways and beliefs. They made them believe that whatever that was white and associated to it was superior to everything native and black. Those who followed them blindly ended up confused hybrids like Eugene. They could neither accept Christianity in its fullness nor could they erase the native influence from their lives. (119)

The children come closest to experiencing the Civil War raging through Nigeria when they go to stay at the University of Nsukka, where Aunt Ifeoma is a professor. The University is beset by fuel shortage, blackouts, no pay, strikes in the classes and medical clinics, no cooking gas, and rising fuel

and food prices. In marked contrast to their comfortable life as a postcolonial hybrid product under their father's strict eyes, Kambili and Jaja experience peace in their heart and soul, and true belonging to their Igbo culture and African roots only in Nsukka. Jaja even concocts his own 'ima mmuo', rite of initiation (a part of the Igbo culture and tradition when a boy becomes a man), by helping in the house, tending Auntie Ifeoma's garden and killing a chicken for food. Kambili's silence and stammering, a psychological impact owing to her father's rigid rules, is offset when she meets Father Amadi, who encourages her to speak her mind. In the process of her transition, she realises that her indoctrination with the thinking that, 'Laughing, smiling or looking at one's own reflection is a sin' is wrong and instead her silence finds a voice.

When Auntie Ifeoma says of her brother, Eugene, 'He is too much a colonial product', she delves deep into his psyche that has become corrupted. (13) Lost between the Igbo traditions that he has abandoned, and the extreme view of Catholicism that he has taken up under the guidance of Father Benedict, Eugene is a confused by-product of postcolonialism. In trying to ape and follow the West, he has become a 'hollowed man'. Kambili questions the despotic rule of her father. She realises that her grandfather is not a heathen when she witnesses his innocence ritual.

The novel ends on a cautiously optimistic note of redemption and hope as well as undertones of freedom with Kambili hoping that Jaja will plant Auntie Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus when he is released from prison. In contrast to the startling red hibiscus growing in Enugu, symbolizing a violent past filled with bloodshed and violence, the purple hibiscus growing in Auntie Ifeoma's garden, requires trust, faith and patience to bloom, and represents rebellion and defiance, foreshadowing a new age that would bring together the past and the present in order to develop a peaceful future.

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