

**"PURPLE" AS A SYMBOLIC COLOUR OF ACTIVIST
RESPONSIVENESS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF TEXTUAL
POLITICS IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

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Abstract

*Owing to the disruption of colonization, there emerged a superfluity of literary productions from the erstwhile colonies that outperformed the worth of the Eurocentric paradigms. Among such emergent English literatures from the former colonies, African literature has an undeniable status of commendable creative imprint. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent Nigerian writer par excellence who has established a sought-after place in literary world, more with the definite politics that she initiates than for her resourceful capability. Her unveiling novel *Purple Hibiscus* portrays the Nigerian societal life with flawless clarity, a traditionalized spiteful order of life where the position of woman is inevitably subjugated and silenced. The protagonist character Kambili, a girl of subdued disposition, functions as a representative of Nigerian womanhood. African feminism is an attempt to include the gushes of African women in its theoretical proclivity. Adichie follows the traditions in *Purple Hibiscus*, as is put forward by various scholars and contributors to African feminism.*

Key words: Post-colonialism, Textual politics, African tradition, Feminism, Adichie, African Feminism, Womanism, etc.

Introduction

One of the greatest impacts of the end of colonial regime in African countries has been the relentless outpour of literary productions that invariably rendered the socio-cultural sentiments of the immediate (post-colonial) milieu. There hardly was any dearth of writers in the post-colonial period who ventured freely out to contextualize the indigenous cultural paradigms and predicaments. Breaking themselves free from the Imperialist

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imagination/discursive methodology and using the Empire's language as a potent weapon, the emergent writers in the newly independent nation states initiated a brilliant delineation of nation's history, racial fables and social chronicles.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer par excellence who also is an ardent follower of Chinua Achebe, another renowned Nigerian author. Through her fictional works like *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* she is trying to portray the steadfast cultural components that pronouncedly exhibit themselves even amidst a possible multicultural hybridity in the contemporary cultural landscape of Nigeria. Her fictional universe portrays the inevitable scuffle between two juxtaposed worlds- one, wheeling on the conventional codes of pre-modern African archetypes and the other, an emphatically articulated colonial prototype foregrounded by the new apostles of Westernization. Regarding the condition of women in Africa, Mineke Schipper in her essay "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism"

asserts:

...the replacement of traditional ideas by Western ones has not proved to be a guarantee for the amelioration of women's position. On the contrary, they may have only served to strengthen ideas which many African creation and origin myths already contained. (37)

Thus, quite contrary to the expectation, colonialization as a systematic/vehement project resulted in strengthening the patriarchal sensibilities prevalent in the cultural schema than bringing in the radiant wisdom of emancipation and equality principles. While imparting Colonial knowledge, the Eurocentric assumptions on woman's position in society percolated to the ancient African perceptions giving birth to new orientation to sexism in various African countries.

African women, instead of gaining liberation, clamoured, suffered and languished within the male-oriented systems of societal strata. The collective experience of African women is one of agony and anguish that Adichie portrays brilliantly as well as effectively in her fictional works. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* she brings in the horrors of Nigerian internal skirmish and eventually tells the touching tale of struggles that women face at the face of a calamitous environment. It pictures the anthropocentric universe that is shattered by man's greed for power and struggles for ultimate control.

Thus, Adichie's narrative universe is the one which explores the subordinated and subsequently devastated landscapes of African woman. Even in a socially and politically liberated African context the condition of women remains deplorable. In a completely dominant circumstance they find no room for thought and articulation. The postulations/ assumptions put forward by Western feminism or even Black feminism were inadequate to address the concerns and threats that African women faced. Thus, emerged the need for a comprehensive mode of feminism that could envelop the diverse issues of African womanhood in its uniqueness. African feminism is neither a reaction/dissent against the theoretical notions of western feminism nor is it a strategy to rebel against male preoccupations but to explore the focal point of intersection between blackness and womanhood.

Hazel Carby in her seminal essay "White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" posits: "History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize of the Western world, have been endowed." (61). Thus, deviating from Western paradigms multiple prototypes of African feminisms try to locate the vast historical trajectory of collective African female experiences and to identify their heterogeneous manifestations. In her essay "We Should All Be Feminists" Adichie states:

Some people ask: "Why the word feminist? Why not just say you are a believer in human rights, or something like that?" Because that would be dishonest. Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. (23)

Passive Receptiveness and Activist Responsiveness: A Politics in the Text
Adichie follows the narrative philosophy as depicted above in her début novel *Purple Hibiscus* and effectively narrates the chronicle of a young, intelligent, fifteen-year old girl named Kambili Achike and her gradual and eventful journey from innocence to experience. Living an inflexible life with her brutal father, a strict disciplinarian and devout catholic, she undergoes several episodes of trepidation and anguish. An active philanthropist and publisher of a newspaper (The Standard), her papa (Eugene Achike) projects a high profile public life. He also owns a factory and Kambili could enjoy the

virtues of richness and material abundance. But along with the excess of wealth, the excess of religious intolerance from her father's part creates a stifling atmosphere at home. Yet Kambili is very tenaciously bonded with the familial relations and is in deep emotional contact with her mama (Beatrice Achike) and brother (Jaja). She stands witness to physical torments inflicted upon Mama even on the most trivial reasons and upon Jaja for not fulfilling his levels of expectations and she too suffers the horrid punishments as she becomes second in the class.

Papa is a towering, domineering and alarming presence in the family who yields absolute control over the family and its members. The severity of his vicious punishments extends even to the anguishing limit of Mama's miscarriage when Papa beats her ruthlessly. When Jaja refuses to go to church on Palm Sunday Papa is infuriated and throws his Catholic liturgical book, breaking the ceramic figurines on the shelves. Kambili is terrified and even more disturbed by the silence that ensues.

She desperately misses the "love-sip" of Papa's tea as well. Mama is an acquiescent presence in the family who is so devoted to serve Papa by all means. She remains contented by the fact that unlike many other men Papa did not marry for a second time and adhered strictly to marital fidelity. Thus, Papa is a complex mixture of divergent attitudes- on the one hand he is an affectionate father and a devoted husband but on the other, he metamorphoses himself to a tenacious disciplinarian and arrogant dictator.

Kambili in this novel is a completely submissive and dutiful girl who yields to the dictates of her father in particular and society in general. Her universe is one where there is no space for individual freedom and she surrenders her private self, character, decisions, aspirations everything to Papa and remains voiceless, responsive and emotionless.

Despite being a bright student at school, her lack of communication with other girls in the class makes her a sequestered being. Fear of her Papa guides her throughout her life and she is a failure in finding her own identity. Though, a powerful, conspicuous presence in the plot, Kambili's submissive silence is felt more than her eloquence. She is a mere victim/product of the patriarchal prejudices prevalent in the socio-cultural terrains of Africa that eventually constrains the female self. The roots of such an oppressive politics as depicted by Adichie is not easy to figure out- whether it is a historical continuum or a later addition during the colonial phase- still, the implications of the paradigms of domination are so vehement that even after gaining political independence the cultural framework of African nation states

remained inevitably patriarchal in sensibility. While problematizing the sexual politics predominant in African countries in general and Nigeria in particular one could easily perceive that Kambili turns out to be a true representative of male-chauvinistic social structures that strive to keep woman completely under control.

Kambili's mother (Beatrice Achike) is another character of unconditional acquiescence who willfully surrenders herself to the brutish command of her husband. Her complete mental edifice is structured in a conventional manner where hardly remains any scope for progressive, liberal ideals of emancipation and equality. She relishes the feeling of being subservient and she proudly announces: "So you say. A woman with children and no husband, what is that? ... A husband crowns a woman's

life, Ifeoma. It is what they want" (75). She is desirous of being ever-loyal and eternally faithful to her husband despite his vile exhibitions of mental humiliation and physical torture. When Eugene's aggression breaks her much-cared, much-adored figurines she hardly is agitated and has no reaction at all. She simply turns to complete the domestic chores of cleaning the area and is concerned more about her husband's tea getting cold. Later, we could perceive that she is keen on justifying the patriarchal positions held by Eugene when she states:

God is faithful. You know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our "umunna" even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else...But your father stayed with me, with us.... Papa deserved praise for not choosing to have more sons with another woman, of course, for not choosing to take a second wife. But then, Papa was different.(28)

According to Naomi Nkealah who considers diverse streams of African feminisms as something which strive to create a new, liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa. Feminisms in Africa, ultimately, aim at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies. Thus, taking the multifarious nature of African experience into consideration, African Feminisms explore the possibilities of embracing the magnitude of their collective experiences. Assorted patterns of feminisms, that deviate from the conceptual equations of (western) feminism and construed after indigenous models emerged in African backdrop- such as Womanism, Negro-feminism, Motherism, Femalism and

Snail-sense Feminism. Being indigenous blueprints, these variegated modes were attempts to demarcate African female at the centre of entire contentions and to explore in the cultural chronicles for material to initiate further elaboration.

For Adichie the label 'feminist' is not something derogatory but an umbrella where every woman should find shelter in. Adichie's pronouncements are completely against the preconceived notions on gender are not meaningful but (universally) arbitrary. In "We All Shall Be Feminists" she says:

But that is not what this conversation is about. Gender and class are different. Poor men still have the privileges of being men, even if they do not have the privileges of being wealthy. I learned a lot about systems of oppression and how they can be blind to one another by talking to black men. I was once talking about gender and a man said to me, "Why does it have to be you as a woman? Why not you as a human being?" This type of question is a way of silencing a person's specific experiences. (16)

The life of women as presented by Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* is an exploration of African female experience- one filled with, apprehension, subjugation, relegation, intimidation, trauma and torture. The novel provides a close evaluation of various traditional and institutional structures that invariably disregard the female existence and bury their experiences forever into oblivion. Adichie's endeavour is to echo the female voice from the annals of African history that has been contrived to record the male versions alone and to reiterate the tell-tales of domination and subjugation.

Kambili's aunty, Ifeoma, is presented as a representative figure of an activist, revolting, progressive and pragmatic womanhood of a modern African ambience who strives to find equal place in society. She lives in Nsukka, a world that is entirely different for Kambili by all means. Though the family undergoes financially stringent conditions, Ifeoma nurtures her three children in a liberal atmosphere where they learn life's values. Her children are given the freedom to question authority. They enjoy self-esteem, individuality and intellectual emancipation- something unknown to Kambili and Jaja. Kambili's universe expands as grandpa joins with them. His life itself is the message for her to understand about human values of love and innate goodness. She enjoys the free air of open-minded outlook. Ifeoma indirectly teaches her so many things. Ifeoma is presented as the only

person capable of questioning her brother Eugene, of fighting against all odds, of facing the most adverse situations. In the novel, Ifeoma becomes a true, assuring and vehement symbol of emerging Africa who could fight for her unconditional independence. She is the embodiment of individual autonomy, intellectual involvement and dynamism.

Conclusion

Significantly, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* studied, is not only the tale of a sheepish femininity but of the valiant, self-assertive struggle to stand one's ground. The end of Papa and the end of a regime hint at a sweeping socio-political change that is about to take place in Nigeria. The change attests to the fact that "purple" is actually a symbolic colour of activist responsiveness in a spiteful traditionalized society like African. Adichie makes her message clear in *Purple Hibiscus*. Thus, it is not about asking for alternatives or arguing for negotiations but being born as a woman is to lead a life with dignity, resistance, identity and manumission.

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