

RETHINKING THE DYNAMICS OF VIOLENCE AS AN INTERNAL NECESSITY: A DECONSTRUCTIONIST READING OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

BY

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Abstract

The bulk of critical works that Purple Hibiscus has drawn so far comprise unavoidable attempts to explain away, endorse or simply discard the novel as a feminist propagandist tool, attempts often validated using the author's personal ideals or interests which she has championed at one time or another and extreme projections of who she is or how she supposedly writes. This kind of criticism has been perpetuated by mirroring its main female characters Kambili and Beatrice in the light of sufferers and Eugene as a violator. This paper examines the creative appropriation and transformation of an otherwise brute force (violence) as a necessary legitimizing tool of order and a form which effectively weaves and sustains the plot of Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, the absence of which causes everything to collapse into chaos. Through criticism, Adichie's works have had to suffer the kind of academic injury that has often been inflicted on Wole Soyinka's works namely Reductionism. The view taken in this paper is that a work of art has integrity and demands attention as a complete object with focused awareness which should reflect inwardly on the work. Thus, through Paul Ricoeur's close reading, a deconstructionist interpretation of Purple Hibiscus is attempted and close attention paid to violence as an internal necessity which keeps the plot alive with the aid of its male character Eugene Achike (Papa)-upon whose death the novel collapses completely. It is argued that the movements or unravelling events in Purple Hibiscus derive from this presence and ordering which also accounts for its complete coherence.

Keywords: violence, dynamics, deconstruction, close reading, internal necessity, form, order, appropriation.

"...This had never happened before in my entire life, never. The compound walls would crumble, I was sure, and squash the fringipani trees. The sky would cave in. The Persian rugs on the stretches of gleaming marble floor would shrink. Something would happen..." (*Purple Hibiscus* 22)

Introduction

Derridean deconstruction wrapped up in one simple phrase, 'There is nothing outside the work', not only sums up deconstruction as a methodology but also guides one on how to seek meaning in the novel under study. It does appear that what readers think of the violence and its performer in *Purple Hibiscus* is shaped and influenced by the external ubiquitous knowledge that violence is maniacal and only done with sadistic motives. In this paper, I tried to examine through deconstructive analyses how the world of meanings produced in *Purple Hibiscus* is ordered and sustained through violence; the patterns, habits and thoughts that structure and consolidate it as 'order' and ultimately 'discipline'.

Speaking rationally about *Purple Hibiscus* is not something most critics do bravely for there is no rationality in the work. An effort to rationalize *Purple Hibiscus* is a Herculean task

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but this paper shall attempt it nonetheless. All the prejudices *Purple Hibiscus* has attracted, precisely builds its fortress around Eugene making it impossible to reach him through any kind of unbiased critiquing. To do the latter would involve one not only breaking through the barriers of misconceptions and prejudices but also proving that this fog and barrage of 'bestly behaviours' and irrationality is the "meaning of this work rethought as its form by means of language alone' (Akwanya) and Eugene a Sumbolon whom like every other character in the work plays out his role and dies for it.

It is worthy of note that the most important critique of Eugene ever made is not just against Eugene but all human males; highlighting the impossibility of the latter to act otherwise, that is to say, it is almost impossible for Eugene not to be cast in the light of the Rough Beast. Destroying the possibility that a Rough Beast as a symbol or a Sumbolon has its continued existence and relevance in the roughness that has become its 'calling' and destiny. The roughness of the beast is determined by the work in the manner that it unravels and in the way the form structures the characters to merely act or live out their relevance. In *Purple Hibiscus*, an attempt to rid the beast of his archetypal beastliness brings the work to an end.

First, the *Purple Hibiscus* experience constantly appears in the discourse of our times as an experience that can only be understood through a negative interpretation. Eugene is never seen as possessing things and attributes properly part of 'human nature' (Mbembe 1). This makes Eugene a symbol of all that is bad, monstrous and bestly; his character's essence reduced to a series of negative experience.

At another level, 'discourse on *Purple Hibiscus* (Eugene) is almost always deployed in the framework of a meta-text about the animal' (Mbembe 1), to be exact, about the beast; its experience, its world, its manifestation. In this meta-text, the life of Eugene unfolds under one sign: what Mbembe refers to as 'the sign of the strange and monstrous. Of what even as it opens an appealing depth before us, is constantly eluding and escaping us. Attempts are made to discover its status and to do so, the first requirement is to apparently abandon' (1) our world of external meanings and focus on the work with an aim to see Eugene as an entity and like other characters of *Purple Hibiscus* whose behaviours are deemed necessary and sustained solely by the plot and the form's power and not merely an entity with shared roots of absolute brutality. Constantly perpetuating the latter has only resulted in critics and readers alike giving an account of Eugene Achike in the way we understand the psychic life of the beast. Eugene becomes in Mbembe's terms only an 'object of experimentation' (1).

The lived experiences in *Purple Hibiscus* differ, the characters simply bump into each other and bruise, this bruising is what the work becomes. The introductory quote captures Kambili's fear of what would happen if her father is disobeyed, if her father is not allowed to be, if an authoriser is called to question or even refused in the remotest sense of the word. The idea of violence is that it is invariably bad, serves no use except for destruction and subjugation. But the violence of *Purple Hibiscus* serves a purpose, it has a pattern, it boasts of an order, structure. It is an entity on its own and akin to what Achille Mbembe would call 'The Commandment' in his *On the Post Colony*:

I refer here to those elements of the obscene and grotesque that Mikhail Bahktin claims to have located in 'non-official' cultures but that, in fact are intrinsic to all systems of domination and to the means by which those systems are confirmed or deconstructed (Mbembe 102)

The Eugene Achike family identifies specifically as one 'sustained' by the experience of violence-a violence that the Pharmakon (Papa) exerts. I say sustain because these bouts of violence keep not just the family system but the muthos thriving-the removal however of this violence and violator brings the novel to an otherwise violent end. The presence of internal coherence is gone and so the work ends.

The Credo of Violence in Purple Hibiscus

Social theories have always tried to legitimise itself by stressing its capacity to reconstruct universal problems. In the case of *Purple Hibiscus*, it is the supposed subjugation of the female characters. In the light of the above, violence as a norm and hence commandment in *Purple Hibiscus* takes a not unusual dimension. First, the founding violence of the missionary which becomes Eugene's truth and so he continues to live it. He inherits this foundational violence and for him it becomes what Mbembe calls 'authorising violence' and subsequently legitimisation. Eugene's distinctive attribute is to act as both 'authority and morality' (Mbembe 26). Let us look at Eugene as the prototype of an animal and one who has become familiarized with/to appropriating violence as a tool. One could as with an animal sympathise with Eugene, even love him; thus we are saddened at his death because he belonged up to a point, to the familiar world. Through this authorizing violence, identities are created and maintained, an example is Kambili.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, violence spreads its tentacles and leaves in its wake problems of subjugation and its attendant -discipline- albeit coerced. We see like Beatrice, a man who does not know what he is doing but is certain why he does it. It is this conviction that fans his ruthlessness. Complicit in this ruthlessness of 'whats and whys' are equally Beatrice and ultimately Jaja and Kambili. Innate in their various acts of self-expression and struggle for freedom is the underlying current of sinister violence compelling them to perpetuate the singular act that naturally ends the pharmakon sequence, the murder of Eugene Achike, their father and husband.-the symbol of institutional violence and order in the work.

Earlier through Papa-Nnukwu, we learn of the impact of the founding violence on his son Eugene:

'*Nekenem*, look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries...Still, I say it was the missionaries that misled my son,' he said, startling me.' (PH 91)

Reading further, Eugene confirms Papa-Nnukwu's worries as he reveals why he thinks burning Kambili's legs is appropriate to stop her from 'walking into sin':

I committed a sin against my own body once,' he said. 'And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St Gregory's came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea, he poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it.' Papa was looking right into my eyes. I did not know he had committed any sins, that he could commit any sins, that he could commit any sins. 'I never sinned against my body again. The good father did that for my own good, he said. (P. 203)

From all indications it is the above founding violence that he recreates as a commandment, as an authorising tool on Kambili each time reminding her that 'everything I do for you, I do for your own good' (P.203). Herein motive as well as intent is confirmed and it is not in any way near evil, it is for 'good'. This violence is what Eugene learns and so relives it as his daily reality. Can one blame him then? If the plot had dragged on Kambili may have become a perpetrator of such commandment just as much as her father had been a recipient. So it simply multiplies.

Eugene becomes the object of experimentation in a system that betrayed him. The Eugene Achike family is characterized by order distinct from what the Auntie Ifeoma family presents—a disorder that many readers will appreciate as normal because it is the familiar. The question however is; on what basis does one condemn Eugene's defence of his truth? Are his actions in the novel wrong because they are considered 'abnormal' or abnormal because they are wrong? What are the standards for Eugene's condemnation? Should a product of founding violence not have to relive that which molded him? The political society of *Purple Hibiscus* thrives on violence, as a matter of fact the only man who does not give in, to abandoning truths for half-truths is Eugene. His newspaper *The Standard* (whose name is significant by the way) continues to preach the truth irrespective of the threats that follow. It is safe to establish that Eugene is a good man who like water has no choice but to take the shape of its container. Papa conceives his truth, his 'familia' and he stands with/in it, he defends it against the unfamiliar (Papa-Nnukwu and Auntie Ifeoma) and dies for his cause.

Violence as an Internal Necessity in *Purple Hibiscus*

Violence in *Purple Hibiscus* creates through parental responsibilities its own legitimacy and governance. The founding violence that births Eugene is effectively relived as his normalcy and authority; herein lies also the various attempts to institutionalize this founding violence as legitimate and real and a part of the characters 'common sense' by 'integrating it into the period's consciousness' (Mbembe 103) and being of the work.

The chain of reaction and events that Papa's terror reign produces are not mere symbols or indicators, they are laden-heavily so to say with meaning that Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice are unable to depart from. Eugene's primary goal or desire is not pleasure as many have argued and tend to argue still, his goal is to bring a specific self-consciousness into being in his family and make it effective which explains why he is unable to tolerate his family's inclination to disorder. To ensure that no challenge occurs towards his arbitrary violence, he adopts powerfully brutish inexplicable acts of self-expressive violence (202-203), this way he perpetuates his normalcy and righteousness.

From the beginning of the work, one sees Jaja defy Papa for the very first time and this is followed by a series of event that Kambili the afflicted narrator outlines. In what seems to be a total defiance to constituted authority, Jaja has completely refused to receive communion, an act which is unheard of in the Achike' family. But the reaction is not quite what Kambili had expected. The reason for this is quite simple. Eugene Achike's 'authorising violence' has gone on without an opposition and has thus far ran its course without fear of any challenge, hence upon Jaja's confrontation, this authority is spellbound with regards to a reaction because it never factors into its commandment any kind of upheaval. As a matter of fact, its subjects have

grown defiant as they have become accustomed to what is their daily routine. According to Kambili:

Maybe Mama had realized that she would not need the figurines anymore; that when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything. I was only now realizing it, only just letting myself think it (23).

The coherence of Eugene's commandment is challenged by Jaja as a singular threat. Jaja poses a threat of internal implosion and his actions are as a result of external influence or awareness raised in Auntie Ifeoma's house. Eugene in return runs the risk of a general loss of both private and family authority for it becomes explicable that what goes on in his family is important to sustain what goes on within him and vice-versa. So he collapses completely when he notices or realises that his family after having been exposed to external influences is no longer under his control. The fact that his commandment has failed is a realisation that Eugene Achike is unable to come to terms with so what he does next is totally expected of him; he devises more brutish means to defend his relevance to the work and the plot by patching up and endorsing more aggressively his authorizing violence.

The authorizing violence senses danger and fights everything that is on its part to enthrone this violence as norm including one of its own (clergy):

That young priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him,' Papa said. (PH 37)

But Eugene is right about the priest, he becomes later, part of what awakens Kambili's consciousness to fight her father's authorizing violence. From the priest she learns to love, to feel a fire, none like what she has experienced with her father. This new experience spurs in her a clash of feelings that the authorizing violence would soon seek to purge her of. Eugene expects perfection from Kambili and Jaja but sadly she keeps faltering, Jaja is much more resolute in accepting and in giving, a resolution that comes to bear in his avowed rejection of his father's ways. Kambili is none of these so she needs a constant reminder of how to adhere to these commandments of the authorizing violence. Eugene reminds her 'Why do you think I work so hard to give you and Jaja the best? You have to do something with these privileges. Because God has given you so much, he expects perfection' (55). Kambili as always receives this indoctrination with a subtle 'It will not happen again, Papa', but it does. She is unable to abide by the Commandments and it leads her authorizer to employ more enforcing measures; Eugene burns her feet with hot water.

On page 110 one sees how swiftly the authorizer distributes punishment and how calmly his recipients abide. Each character simply plays their role. After Eugene Achike flogs his family for desecrating the Eucharistic fast,

'Mama took the belt from him and laid it on the table. Papa crushed Jaja and me to his body. 'Did the belt hurt you? Did it break your skin?' he asked, examining our faces. I felt a throbbing on my back, but I said no, that I was not hurt. It was the way Papa shook his head when he talked about liking sin, as if something weighed him down, something he could not throw off (111).

While a reader may feel fear for Eugene's family what one must feel for Eugene is pity. The excruciating pain and regrets he always has to go through for having to punish his family is humongous. It is even worse considering that he cannot do otherwise, this is all he knows, and this is all he can ever be which is why he always wills and implores his family not to 'walk in sin'. His regret and devastation is evident after he burns Kambili's feet and almost kills her when he spots her wielding a portrait of Papa Nnukwu 'the pagan'. The commandment of the authorizer is clearly stated from the beginning; relations must never be maintained with Papa Nnukwu as a result of his paganism despite being Eugene's biological father. The founding violence alongside its own commandment sees Eugene severing relations with his biological father but Kambili in turn is unable to do so hence incurring on herself the wrath of the authoriser.

If one cannot sympathise with Eugene and his inability to 'act otherwise' then Beatrice may also not receive the reader's pity since she is just as much a recipient of an authorizing violence as much as Eugene was a recipient of founding violence. If the actions of the Beatrice is excusable why does such not also apply to the Eugene? Or does Eugene have to look so beastly that his wife Beatrice would be justified in murdering him?

A clear case can be made for Eugene and that is that he never did anything that he did not have to do. As an authorizer and direct recipient of a founding violence, he runs his 'proselytisation' as the plot directs and never punishes unless a resistance is sensed. For all within the book, his violent actions are all justified with 'good intentions'. If Beatrice's murder of her husband is a necessary response to an authorizing violence, then all of Eugene's actions are necessary response to a founding violence the births and shapes him.

Conclusion

Derridean deconstruction aims at saving works from the worst possible critiquing violence by seeking to reevaluate and understand the connection between meaning, text and structure. It is on this note that this paper has attempted to render justice to Eugene by deconstructing his actions and disregarding authorial intent. Same way deconstruction 'problematizes the foundation of law, morality and politics' is how this paper has problematised the foundation of Eugene's upbringing as that which shapes his subsequent behavior and the rest of the work.

The thrust of this paper is summarily that the plot of *Purple Hibiscus* and the Achike family holding together is dependent on violence, the elimination of which ends the play and disrupts everything. As an aesthetic device, however, the violent events in *Purple Hibiscus* is in tandem with the general breakdown of the story and may even be ropeferred to as a tragic sequence because it is 'where actions may be expected to have implications far beyond the norm in the real world because of the grandeur of the persons performing them...' (Akwanya 131). I quote the above because the audience /reader is bound to see Eugene's behavior as ambiguous. The essence of this is to cast Kambili and the rest of the sufferers in the light of victims. We should also know that for Eugene, every ambition or action of his comes from a place of pain and anguish in an attempt to enforce the integrity of his violence.

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