

**SHIFTING DOMINANT TERRAINS THROUGH
RESISTANCE: WOMANIST ARTICULATIONS IN
ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS**

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial Literature is built around the concept of resistance as subversion, opposition and mimicry. It particularly focusses on colonized people who attempts to articulate identity and reclaim the past in the face of past's inevitable otherness. Feminism and post colonialism are occupied with the similar questions of representations, voice, marginalization and relation between politics and literature. The recognition of resistance help to locate the implicit urges of women to redefine their self and to survive not in abject passivity but with dignity. The African imaginative construct cannot be devoid from its social context because it is the context that animates it. As a postcolonial text, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut work *Purple Hibiscus* critiques the violence of Christian religion, colonial forces and patriarchal domination. This novel is a powerful tale of a family in postcolonial Nigeria and explores the growth process of the protagonist Kambili who struggles hard to liberate herself from the totalitarian temperament of her father's home. The paper attempts to trace the growth of the protagonist through the progress of nation. Kambili begins as the teller in the tale and at the end she herself becomes the tale. Throughout the discourse silence is conceptualized as a tool employed by the dominant group to regulate the existence of the subservient group around the margins. Gradually the subservient group attains power and agency in the subversion of the tool. The existential wrangling of African identity is well reflected in this work. Womanism, as a variant of African feminism, provides the platform for a holistic analysis of the works of African female writers.

Key Words: *Resistance, Subversion, Womanism, Feminism, Post colonialism and ,African Identity.*

One of the writer's main function has always been to expose and attack injustice. Should we keep at the old theme of racial injustice (sore as it still is) when new injustices have sprouted all around us? I think not.

- Chinua Achebe

The writings of African literary figures restored the people's faith in themselves and in the rich traditions of the African continent. The most important aspect of African literature is that being postcolonial writing, it is marked by strain of protest. The ever changing reality of life inevitably reflects itself in literature. The status of women all over the world has been undergoing a rapid change in recent times. The women of today has been fighting for recognition in the face of stiff resistance offered by man. Women writers like Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Buchi Emecheta, Mabel Segun from Nigeria, Ama Ata Aidoo, Efua Sutherland from Ghana, Mariama Ba from Senegal, Rebecka Njau and Grace Ogot from Kenya and Bessie Head from South Africa are prominent. Their works are intimately concerned with the predicament of heroines who represent African womanhood under the stress of social change.

The modern women writers have been entrusted with the task of redeeming contemporary women from the narrow corridors of customs, traditions, social evils and male dominance. Today in Africa, a woman's writing is paralleled with woman's fighting. The women writers fight for truth, honesty, freedom and equality to complete their mission. This is particularly true of the portrait of women in the works of Adichie. She places her women characters in situations where their values conflict with those of their men and milieu. They show initial patience, meekly undergo suppression and suffer agony caused by male authority. But they break all the chains caused by male authority and constricting traditions of social setup. The characters like Kambili and Ugwa are considered to have a significant place among the new African women. The gender war has become one of Adichie's major themes and her mission obviously is to awake self-consciousness among women.

Literature has proved a worthy tool in interrogating the female condition. The African female writers normally focus on resistance to all forms of patriarchal behaviour. They wanted to generate women characters who can live their lives in the desired way and be responsible for their own livelihoods and future. They hold in high esteem womanist values which promote independence, togetherness and survival. Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a womanist novel which propagates the womanist gospel particular to the

needs of African people and accommodates men, women and children. It looks at the struggles of African women from a holistic angle incorporating racial, cultural, national, economic, sexist and political issues with the ultimate goal of ensuring the survival and unity of all in black communities.

African feminism has been defined as an “abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant” (Davies, p.561). It is more pragmatic and freed from the shackles of Western feminism; for it does not negate men rather it accommodates them. The mainstream feminism has failed to theorize aspects of the struggles of African women which do not affect white women. For example, white women only face the struggle of fighting for sexual equality in opposition to white men. On the other hand, black women must contend with oppression from their black/African male counterparts while also being suppressed economically, politically and racially by white patriarchal systems along with their men. She therefore calls African feminism “humanistic feminism” because it is dedicated to the total liberation of humanity.

Womanism, a significant variant of African feminism provides the platform for a comprehensive analysis of the works of African female writers. Ogunyemi’s womanist theory is relevant in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is clear that Adichie leans more towards challenging and usurping patriarchy and she is more aggressive in questioning, criticizing and subverting male authority as compared to Buchi Emecheta. Ogunyemi, in her article, “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English,” asserts that “the ultimate difference between the feminist and the womanist is thus what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed” (69).

Purple Hibiscus can be read as another salvo against colonialism and the attendant patriarchy that has been apprehended in much of West African fiction. The tyrannical Catholic Father is completely predisposed towards Western colonial ideals. His domineering and violent attitude makes him beat his wife and children and these qualities possibly could be considered as part of the end products of the legacy of colonialism. Dawes observes that the novel begins with Achebe’s monumental narrative of a “clash of cultures” as the first sentence in the novel reads “things began to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go for communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines

on the etagere” (1). The rigid Catholicism of Eugene Achike, immersed in abuse and hypocrisy really falls at the end of the novel.

Adichie belongs to the new generation of Nigerian writers who are rejecting the long silence imposed by dictatorial regimes. *Purple Hibiscus* is the coming of age of the trauma that leads to chaos in a family. It is in the period of trauma the father dies, his son goes to jail and his daughter and wife have to find a way to patch the wounds that will not heal. The work orbits around the life story of Kambili who is courageous enough to tell her experiences at home. This in fact mirrors the state of the Nigerian society; a society governed by patriarchy. The patriarch figure uses his own brand of Catholicism to dominate his family and Achike home is portrayed as a microcosm of the chaotic Nigerian nation.

The evolution of Kambili is womanist in character and her awakening is that of a womanist awakening. The only language that is perfected in the home is that of the language of speaking with spirits and the eyes. Both Kambili and Jaja become masters of this art of speaking. Silence becomes a means used by Achike to maintain his patriarchal control over his wife and children. Within womanist theoretical concerns, Palm Sunday becomes the day that begins the march towards freedom and independence for Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice from the abusive and sexist stance of their father. Likewise it is the trajectory of the transformation of Kambili's life from the “timid, girlish and voiceless” sixteen-year old to a bold, vocal and enthusiastic woman. Kambili struggles hard to make her mouth function within the totalitarian temperament of her father's home. According to Okuyade “The protagonist is involved in a crisis with religious and domestic stakes at the beginning of the narrative; she seems to be a mere observer and victim, but as the novel drags towards its denouement, she realizes her voice and role in the home after her awakening”(1).

Adichie is not a writer who dwells in the world of illusion but a writer who is true to the womanist representation and portrayal of life. Achike fails miserably to recognize that there is a thin line between the familial rule and the military rule of the nation. There is the paradox of Achike's newspaper criticizing the military regime but he does not recognize that he is the symbol of military dictatorship within his home. From the beating of his wife and children, deploying a mechanical and compulsory lifestyle through time tables, insisting his children not to sing Igbo songs, to restricting his children's relations her sister Ifeoma and others, Achike is becoming a replica of military leadership in the novel.

Kambili's formative years as an adolescent is marked by the wish to articulate several things to her father. But she lacks sociable disposition and emotional expression. Her inability to socialize with her classmates earns her the nickname "backyard snob". In her own words:

But I did not worry too much about that (emphasis mine, that referring to her status as a "backyard snob") because I carried a bigger load- the worry of making sure I came first this term. It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand (52).

She masters knowledge and adopted several unique ways of studying. Thus Kambili is distinguished from her girlish classmates into a womanish adolescent as she is able to overcome many difficulties she encounters both at home and in school. It is further interesting to note that at the end of the term, she comes out as the topper. This is in fact Kambili's first triumph and an escape from her father's public ridicule.

Another womanist triumph comes through her meeting the inspirational aunt, Ifeoma who symbolizes the womanist vision of audaciousness, outrageousness and willful behaviour. She questions and challenges patriarchal authority and domination within Achike's home and in the country as a whole. Kambili is therefore right in describing her as an ancient forebear of matriarchal power and organization. Ifeoma's home in Nsukka becomes the agent of Kambili and Jaja's metamorphosis in various ways. Every change that occurs in their lives is instigated by Ifeoma's liberalism and fierce character. Apart from teaching and demonstrating to Jaja and Kambili how to laugh and be free minded, Ifeoma also teaches them to sing when they recite the rosary in Nsukka for the first time. When she questions them for not joining in the singing the answer she gets is "We don't sing at home" (125). The piece of information Jaja and Kambili relay to their Aunty is very significant within womanist theory. The Igbo songs are one of the ways of appropriating African culture to Catholicism. The natives sing Igbo songs to affirm their conviction that Igbo is as good as English and the fact that Western culture is not superior to African culture. Achike and Father Benedict's dislike Igbo songs of worship.

Ifeoma decided to educate Kambili through making her read *Equiano's Travels*, a pioneering work of African literature, which deals with the dictatorial, oppressive and inhumane atmosphere that exists within the Nigerian nation and the Achike home. It also

emphasizes the womanist idea of togetherness and inclusiveness in the sense that Ifeoma chooses to thrust a novel written by a male, and not that of a female, into the hands of Kambili. The meaning of Equiano's name is the fundamental crisis of Kambili's teenage years, the fact she does not have a loud voice, cannot speak well and cannot say the words she really wants to say. The novel offers inspiration for Kambili to break forth from her silence. Equiano further becomes an stimulating character for Kambili because he himself, a slave under difficult and inhuman conditions, lived, spoke against and fought for the abolitionist cause. The work also becomes a therapeutic tool for Kambili to gain strength and hope that her father's oppression will come to an end someday.

Like Kambili, Equiano is a Christian whose narrative is full of his belief and trust in God. Kambili therefore acquires two weapons to stand against her father's ill treatment: the spirit to speak out and the hope she has in God in the midst of her traumatic experiences. In contrast to the silence that exists in her life and that of her home in Enugu, Kambili sums up life under Aunt Ifeoma's care in this way:

Laughter always rang out in Aunt 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. The flat always sparkled. Amaka scrubbed the floors with a stiff brush, Obiora did the sweeping, Chima plumped up the cushions on the stairs. Everybody took turns washing plates. Aunt Ifeoma included Jaja and me in the plate-washing schedule... (139).

Apart from transforming emotional inflexibility of Jaja and Kambili, Ifeoma also influences them ideologically. Adichie, through Ifeoma, gives a history of Jaja of Opobo in relation to colonialism and the fact that Jaja of Opobo did not give in to the demands of colonial authority. The most important detail in the historical anecdote is Ifeoma's view that "Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes" because "Defiance is like marijuana- it is not a bad thing when used right" (143-44). The result of positive side of defiance will begin to rear its head when Jaja questions his father's insistence of converting his grandfather, Papa Nnukwu to become a Christian. As a religious liberalist, Ifeoma encourages Kambili and Jaja not to regard Papa Nnukwu as a heathen but as a traditionalist.

Adichie places Amaka as a contrast to Kambili from the initial stages of the story to make the readers realize the transformation that takes place in Kambili's life. Amaka is a girl-womanist whose views on African culture are as mature as her mother's. She influences Kambili with her culturally conscious music. By intentionally choosing to listen to indigenous musicians as opposed to foreign musicians, Amaka is used by Adichie to make an appreciation for black culture. She believes that despite the corruption and lack of development, all Africans should stay in their countries and strive to make it better rather than migrate to greener pastures. Amaka is a culturally womanist character, who prefers Igbo names such as *Chiamaka* (God is beautiful), *Chima* (God knows best) and *Chiebuka* (God is the greatest) and refuses to take an English name for her confirmation despite pleas from her mother and father Amadi.

Adichie employs a rhetorical device through which she interrogates the Nigerian socio-political situation as part of womanist critical discourse. Kambili continues to search for her voice, likewise, Nigeria also continues her search for self-definition and nationhood. Wole Soyinka describes the silent spaces where the Nigerian people continue to be subjected as the art of stealing a nation's "most precious asset – its voice" (8). The novel displays the imperceptibility and insensitivity of government to the plight of the people who continue to stumble in poverty and oppression. The people are subjected to different forms of subjugation, ranging from poor supply of potable water, unstable power supply to the shortage of petroleum products. They protest their deplorable plights through industrial actions and demonstrations of different forms.

Achike's sexist oppression of his wife functions within a dominant patriarchal system. The process of "Othering" by Achike is carried out in a subordinating way that shows disregard for the basic humanity of his wife. The chasm in the economic status and power between Beatrice and Achike consolidates the patriarch's control and power. Achike causes Beatrice to experience three miscarriages. She laments to Ifeoma as she turns to Kambili, "You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly"... "My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes" (243). Beatrice is less treated as a human being and a woman. Ifeoma on the other hand is an example of a woman whose role is multifaceted outside of marriage. She freely express her opinion on critical issues without mincing her words and rule her family as well. Women for her are not mere reproductive vessels but human beings.

The poisoning of Achike by his wife is not a sign of cowardice but a realization and utilization of her strength, a woman's strength. Beatrice on the other hand also realizes that she is the one who supervises everything that has to do with food within the Achike home. Eugene's death is no coincidence within womanist theory because bad men are sometimes eliminated in womanist novels so that men and women can live together harmoniously (Ogunyemi, 75 – 76).

Purple Hibiscus explores the issues of ethnic tensions and political unrest in Nigeria as parallels for coming of age and issues of identity definition. The allegory between personal and national identity elevates this story from a typical narrative of adolescent into a thoughtful analysis of the formation of self. The youth of Nigeria are tasked with rebuilding the nation, depopulated after a destructive war. Kambili and Jaja are allegories for burgeoning post-colonial Nigeria, which must also face an adolescent-like emergence into an identity separate from its colonial roots. Kambili and Jaja are bombarded by opposing forces: indigenous and colonial, Pagan and Christian, Nigerian and English, familial loyalty and individual identity. Eugene is the consummate colonizer, seeking to establish order within his family. Any individual or nation attempting to navigate a new identity must first come to terms with its past. Papa-Nnukwu represents indigenous culture specifically that of Igbo land. He is the only one who practices Igbo cultural traditions. It is this culture, combined with the colonizing culture that has created the sibling futures of Nigeria that Eugene and Ifeoma, represent: autocracy and democracy.

However, as Kambili enters her adolescence and incipient womanhood, she begins to shape her own identity. She has begun to explore her history. Like any colonizing country's attitude to the people under colonial rule, Eugene assumes that the needs of his children are the same as his own. He does not consider that their needs may be unique and uniquely suited to their circumstances. Eugene acts almost in the capacity of a feudal king, whose law is absolute and whose reign, at least in Kambili's eyes, is both immutable and eternal. Kambili never considers that a change in regime will come. She never considers "the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die . . . he had seemed immortal" (287). Eugene's authority and social standing represent the regime change of imperialism. His murder at the hands of his wife represents another sudden regime change, the overthrow of colonizing powers.

When Eugene represents Nigeriathrough the failed goals of colonizing Europe, Father Amadi is one of the imagined futures of Nigeria, representative of the ideal of Nigerian unification. He has successfully blended the colonizing culture with the indigenous one. His songs of praise are sung both in English and Igbo, and he is less bound to European Catholic tradition than Eugene. Ifeoma is representative of the democratic option for Nigeria's imagined future. It is a future where all people, regardless of ethnic group, religion, or gender, are allowed to have a voice. Although Ifeoma and Eugene share the same blood, they represent wildly divergent styles of rulership: Eugene, the somewhat tyrannical imperialism; Ifeoma, the modern Western democracy. Kambili and Jaja must choose from among the potential futures available to them. Their choice will solidify burgeoning identities. Ifeoma's style of parenting is represented by the flowers in her yard, which are the namesake of the novel: the purple hibiscus. Upon first sighting the flowers, Jaja is strangely drawn to them:

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

According to Freud, "unhomely" is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). Applying Freud's theory of "unhomely" to postcolonial fiction, Bhabha says that "unhomely" means "the estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world" (44), a place where "the borders between home and the world become confused" (9), and amalgamation of private and public leads to "a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (9). Bhabha uses the concept of the uncanny to characterize the post-colonial experience. This is relevant when the experiences of childhood that have once been repressed return to disrupt our everyday existence.

The paper also attempts to apply the concept of 'unhomely' and 'uncanny' to the conditions in the household of Eugene. He makes the life of his family members miserable by making them follow his false ideals. The home thus becomes 'unhomely' under the control of Eugene, who is conflicted in the confrontation of his native self with his projected self. His inherent goodness is in conflict with the induced values developed as a direct influence of his colonial education. This gulf between the once familiar values (his African

roots) and the assimilated unfamiliar values (acquired through education) evokes the sense of uncanny in him.

The life of children and mother in the home under the domination of Eugene parallels a situation where oppressive national histories express themselves in domestic spaces, converting the home into an 'unhomely' space where the family does not feel safe. They have internalized a sense of estrangement from Eugene due to the colonial influence on him. In Eugene's home, there are many parallels to the state of affairs in the country. The members in the house apart from Eugene are not allowed to express their feelings or opinions. Like the colonial masters, Eugene takes it upon himself to make every decision about the fate of the residents of his mini-republic. From religion and politics to their daily routine, everything is decided by the tyrannical man. Kambili, Jaja and their mother Beatrice try to adhere to the norms set by the whimsical father based upon his distorted readings of Christianity.

Inside his domestic space, Eugene loses the veneer of civilization and reverts back to a savage state quite unfamiliar to the outside people. However hard he tries to disown his roots, he cannot rid himself of them. The native part of his 'self' which he tries to subdue and dispossess surfaces at the most unexpected moments. Caught between this confusion of familiar and unfamiliar, even his goodness is at war with himself. His charity and social service show that he is a person who believes in basic goodness and humanity. However, like other aspects of his behaviour, this goodness too is reserved only for the Christians. Even his father is left untouched by the generosity he exhibits for Christians.

CONCLUSION

African literature has been enriched by the voices of women expressing their concerns. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* aptly portrays womanist aspirations and values. She is committed to the womanist goal of survival in the patriarchal culture. She imbues her female characters with strength, resilience, and courage while undermining patriarchal authority. Womanist hope permeates her agenda as Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice get another opportunity to begin their lives anew, afresh; it is in fact their rebirth. Ogunyemi's womanist theory regards the freedom of women through a meaningful union between black women, black men and black children. It also encourages men to change from their sexist stand. Likewise Adichie remains committed to the unity and survival of African race under one umbrella.

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