

**Western mentality and emasculation in Chimamanda
Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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ABSTRACT: *The condition of Africa since colonisation has continued to form part of the major discourses in the human sciences, especially in literary criticism. The first harm colonisation did to Africans was to impose on them a way of life completely alien to them and criminalise any form of agitation to question this imposition, thereby leaving them with an undue reverence for anything Western. This way of thinking has continued to impede the understanding of our true selves. Since Africa encountered colonisation, she has not ceased to grapple with the daunting challenge of grasping the meaning of life. This paper intends to examine the emasculating effect of colonial mentality using Eugene's family as a microcosm of larger society as depicted in Adichie's ground-breaking novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, which presents interestingly new and useful insights into the explication of the father-figure as an agent of colonial emasculation. It appears that there is a tacit agreement between members of the family to eliminate Papa (Eugene) who may be seen as a vestige of their colonial past. This action vividly brings out the revenge motif in the story. Using a postcolonial-oriented critical approach, this paper seeks to open a new way of thinking which would free us from the stifling bondage of falling for westernisation hook, line and sinker.*

Introduction

Most of the earlier discussions on the effect of colonisation centered on how Africa was underdeveloped by the colonial encounter. This kind of reading was necessitated by the social and cultural milieu of that time. It may amount to insincerity and disservice to ourselves if we still heap the blames for all our problems on the West. Chinua Achebe and the earlier critics sounded an inaugural note of warning to turn to ourselves and look inwards to solve our own problems. He said that the 'time has come when we must assume responsibility for our problems and our situation in the world and resist the temptation to blame other people' ('Colonialist Criticism' 3).

With this, the searchlight has been turned on us in order to find out from where the moth came to eat up the marrow of our destiny. The era to claim a 'victimised status' (Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair 340) is long gone. It is time we questioned our saintly regard of things just because they are Western. It is, therefore, our interest to take a position

that would present us with a mentality to re-examine what we have hitherto believed, look back into our history and re-align ourselves with what is native to us. This paper does not in any way seem to suggest an outright rejection of Western civilization, but it believes that a sincere and objective investigation into *our own* may reveal something significant. When we examine the characters in our text in this light, we may begin to have a glimpse of the very essence/meaning of life.

Colonisation may well have succeeded in achieving some if not all of the objectives it set out to achieve one of which was to Westernise Africa. The colonial policy of assimilation lends credence to this. When this failed, it turned to a rather subtle means of thwarting the psyche of the people. Whatever colour this cultural imposition takes, it is clear that because it is not native to the people, coupled with the coercion with which it comes, it is likely to be met with a rebuff. And any attempt to embrace it may be visited with the same kind of fate that befalls Eugene Achike (Papa) of our text.

Another strong instrument of Westernization is globalism which had universalism as its forerunner. It is obvious that an issue like this is an ideological one. But it may be difficult to engage in this kind of discussion without involving some ideological debate. Chinweizu, *et al.* warn that: ... ideological considerations always do enter into literary criticism, and this is as it should be. For a work has to be evaluated not on issues of “pure art” alone, but also on the values it urges upon its readers, implicitly as well as explicitly. Moreover, even issues of “pure craft” embody social values. The proper and inevitable question therefore ought to be, not whether there is ideology or not, but rather which ideology.... We should therefore at all times be suspicious of claims of ideological virginity. We should indeed probe all the harder for hidden ideological agendas whenever a critic makes a pretense at offering “objective,” “value-free” criticism (140)

However, they added that as critics, we should not allow such ideological and moral judgments to masquerade as artistic ones and therefore be used to judge a literary work. If we, by any means, adopt this monolithic approach, we may not be able to arrive at what Romanns Egudu calls the 'artistic objectives' of the literary piece (83). Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson strengthen this view by saying that in order for us to have a fuller appreciation of literary texts, we have to narrow the gap between literary discourses and real life. For them, 'human beings think conceptually for the purpose of affecting their reality in one way or the other' (3). They add also that it is these 'socially-oriented issues being addressed [that] make the abstract discussions come alive and interesting' (2).

Some African critics have surprisingly continued to blindly see the West as setting the standards for literary criticism. They go on to accept their systems and 'habits of thought' (Nicholas Akwanya 123) without questioning. A close probe of the text will tell us if one can make any headway with this kind of mentality; and also reveal how society regards anyone who is an agent of this Western emasculation. In the text, we encounter Papa trying to uphold what Eustace Palmer refers to as the 'civilized standards' (19). To Palmer, a vision which does not defend these standards is morally weak which is to say that a vision which does not defend Western culture and its values is morally weak.

Review of Criticism and Justification

Postcolonial criticism or scholarship, which once had popular bracketing understanding, has now 'moved in several different directions, and one that has always had multiple legacies' (Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair 2). They however acknowledge that these aspects still have 'recognizable patterns, shared family resemblances, and common genealogies' (2). Interest in postcolonial studies rose remarkably in the eighties. Some have even traced its inception to the Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which published in 1978. But whether it is a recent area of scholarship or not, its concerns embrace such issues as the place of regional cultures and traditions in nationalism, that of the colonial languages, the issue of marginalisations and inequalities, among others. We know that this thought did not originate from literary criticism critics, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural historians are equally interested. Postcolonial literary theory therefore is largely informed by cultural criticism.

Another aspect of postcolonial theory, the one which the theoretical tilt of this paper is premised on, has to do with Rereadings of the Euro American [literary] canon, investigations of the production of colonial stereotypes and the "inventions" of the other, materialist analyses of social conditions, critical analyses of postcolonial literatures and cultures, theorizations of categories such as subalternity, ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity... (Desai and Nair 5).

These colonial stereotypes surprisingly exist even in the postcolonial era. Damian Opata describes such people as ...postcolonial subjects who through their immersion in western ideological frames and structures betray their own culture... This betrayal comes about in the process of the dynamic interplay of self, new self, and context. Sometimes, it masks as a form of character objectification and the actualization of the individual's original imaginary. It is a psychological problem in the process of people's adaptation to emerging ideas that impose themselves in an alien environment (24).

There is no doubt that new dimensions to postcolonial criticism are still evolving. But the analysis here explores the dangers of subjecting oneself to orientations and behaviour which still have colonial connotations. Much has been done on *Purple Hibiscus*, but the approach adopted in this discourse appears novel, for it takes a close examination of the actions of the characters and their implications to our understanding of the postcolonial life.

Papa actually sees those African values which do not correspond to his standards as being morally weak, and therefore not to be identified with. Kambili, the narrator, tells us that '[Papa] hardly spoke Igbo.... he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English' (13).

For him, to speak anything other than English, especially in public, is being morally (or even culturally) weak. To this end, he tries to coerce his children to maintain those standards he views as civilised. Auntie Ifeoma, Papa's sister, sees Eugene, his brother as 'too much of a colonial product' (13). Papa sees it as so defiling, so to speak, to speak Igbo (or even sing Igbo songs in church) that even when the visiting priest at St. Agnes breaks into an Igbo song, he kept mute and made sure he lures Kambili and Jaja into doing the same. To be more civilised, each time he speaks, he makes his accent sound British '...in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially with the white religious....' (46). Also, he '...liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed that they had good sense' (60). To some extent, he succeeds in indoctrinating his children, especially Kambili. She describes Papa-Nnukwu's accent as 'ancient' because it does not have '... anglicized inflection' (64) as hers does.

Religion is the greatest instrument of Westernising Africa. The wickedness Eugene unleashes on the members of his family is informed not only by his inclination to a Western religion, but its abuse resulting from his rigid and sadistic mindset. What this kind of understanding does is to *inferiorise* the ways of life that are native to the people by tagging them local, pagan or uncivilised. Some critics have even seen this work as a satiric one which lampoons 'Christian religion and its claims of superiority over the African Traditional Religion' (Eze Chidiebere 290). He adds that:

In spite of all his claim to be a Christian, Eugene is a sadist. He seems to drive joy in the act of brutality. Beatrice is even the worst, in spite of her Christian background... she has the courage to poison her husband (290).

This proves that one's religious inclination notwithstanding, what matters in the worship of God is kindheartedness and love for all.

From the events in the story, it is evident that Papa-Nnukwu, the traditionalist, is the epitome of this kind of *love-for-all, scorn-free* life. This is the same man that Eugene regards as heathen and unholy. Papa even warns his children never to have anything to do with him because he is a pagan. The only character that could be compared with Papa-Nnukwu in this regard is Father Amadi. But we shall see later that Father Amadi is not free from western mentality.

The effect of this kind of indoctrination is so overwhelming that it beclouds the normal reasoning of the individual, and sets the individual to see his people and the things they do as mediocre. Another example of a character that propagates this Eurocentric vision is Beatrice's father, who is identified as Grandfather. Grandfather is the English equivalent of Papa-Nnukwu, which is Igbo; but Kambili tells us that '...he had insisted that we call him Grandfather in English, rather than Papa-Nnukwu or Nna-Ochie' (67). This kind of vision aims at *inferiorising* anything African by presenting its Western version as better. The narrator also tells us that Grandfather '...did things that right way, the way the white people did it, not what our people do now!' (67). The grand deception is in criminalizing what is cultural with the people and doing the same thing, but now in the *Christian* way. This kind of mindless transposition is clearly depicted when Eugene's family visits the Igwe's palace. Kambili tells us that:

Mama had greeted him [the Igwe] the traditional way that women were supposed to,... Back home that night, Papa told Mama that it was sinful. You do not bow to another human being. It was an ungodly tradition, bowing to an Igwe. So, a few days later, when we went to see a bishop at Awka, I did not kneel to kiss his ring. But Papa yanked my ear in the car and said I did not have the spirit of discernment: the bishop was a man of God; the Igwe was merely a traditional ruler (94).

This kind of direct replacement is a sore deception. This only makes some people stark hypocrites rejecting something in a given form and accepting it even in a worse form just because it is now repackaged to look western. Because this conception is perceived as saintly, it cannot be questioned. Eugene describes such practices as '...remnants of ungodly traditions' (73) or 'Devilish Folklore' (85). But Auntie Ifeoma rightly describes him as someone who quarrels with the truths he does not like.

Ogaga Okuyade says that Eugene's putting on airs of 'Catholic superiority amounts to bigotry and reduces members of his family to the size of midgets' (n. p.). This makes Eugene's family members machines in his hands. He tosses them about as he wishes. This kind of psychological chain strips one of any sense of individuality and

humanness. Even though Eugene is wealthy and has a commodious and magnificent residence, there is no peace and freedom in his home. The narrator says that 'Although our spacious dining room gave way to an even wider living room, I felt suffocated' (7). The brunt of Eugene's brutality is suffered by everybody in the family, including Papa's nukwu.

Salman Rushdie sees people like Eugene as 'translated men' who get things wrong and mixed up because of obstinacy and the translation of values (7). The high-handedness of Papa brings everybody under the compulsory obedience to his draconian rules. They, the children especially, live a life of immitation: they must obey the time-table; never associate with the 'neathen'; must not express their opinion and must be restricted by 'strict order'. - the words of Anthony C. Oha, it is "...surprising that a man who fights for the political freedom of his people through his journalistic ventures could apply what he attacks [outside] in his home (n. p.). As a translated man, Eugene's whole reasoning has been beclouded to the point that he behaves senselessly. It may not be out of place to even see him as one who has lost touch with reality. When Kambili is ill and decides to take just little food to hold the tablets she takes on a Sunday morning, Papa unleashes his wickedness on the entire family. Kambili says that '[Papa] unbuckles his belt ... it landed on Jaja firstThen Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm...'(102).

Each time Kambili and Jaja are to travel to Nsukka to be with Auntie Ifeoma's family, they always show great signs of excitement knowing that they are going to be away from the emasculating presence of their father * a father-figure that makes fear knock in their bones. Kambili sees Auntie Ifeoma's house as a place '...where the air was free for you to breathe as you wished' (120). No person can function maximally under the kind of atmosphere in Eugene's house. Even his wife, Beatrice, hardly speaks; each time she does, she speaks in 'monosyllables.' They are all in a social, religious, emotional and psychological imprisonment. Kambili and Jaja become different persons once they are at Nsukka. They enjoy the air of freedom and love while it lasts at Auntie Ifeoma's house because "Laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma's house. ..'(139).

This kind of mental bondage reduces Kambili and Jaja to social misfits. At Nsukka, Amaka asks them: 'Are you sure they're [Kambili and Jaja] not abnormal, mom?... she behaves funny. Even Jaja is strange. Something is not right with them' (141). Kambili finds it difficult to talk even when she knows what to say. In school, she is christened 'backyard snob' because she finds it difficult to associate with her mates. It appears that the *marauding* presence of her father goes with her wherever she goes. And that makes it difficult for her to come out of

her shell. When Jaja speaks so easily, she wonders if he has not 'the same bubbles of air in his throat' (144) the 'bubbles' instilled by her father's influence. Her words show the extent of her bondage: 'I had not wanted to go with them, and yet when I could no longer hear the sound of his car, I wished I could run after it' (162) and '...I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have' (163). This depicts the image of an imprisoned life. The condition her family puts her into has affected her psyche.

When Kambili begins to get rid of the mental veils that long becloud her, she says: 'I felt that I was at home, that I was where I had been meant to be for a long time' (177). She makes this statement when she is in the company of Father Amadi. Father Benedict who is one of the agents of perpetuating and propagating the Western vision does not seem to understand the people as much as Father Amadi does. Amadi's relationship with the members of his congregation is quite cordial and peaceful. He helps to get 'the bubbles' out of Kambili's throat.

The climax of Eugene's brutality is when he bums the feet of his children for sleeping in the same house as their grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. Also the two incidents where he beats his wife that she suffers a miscarriage may have made him to commit what Ernest Emenyonu calls 'tragic excesses' (qtd. in Nwahunanya XIII). These incidents present Eugene as an unbearable character. The dehumanizing picture painted by the 'hot-water' scenario shows that Eugene may be seen as having been so overwhelmed by his religious fanaticism that he becomes senseless:

He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it towards my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment... The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding, I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed (192).

He does this with apparent impunity and goes on to say: '..this is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You bum your feet] (192). Despite Kambili's 'sobbing voice' and the 'excruciating pain', he goes ahead to do the same thing to Jaja. This is obviously in contrast to what Auntie Ifeoma says, that 'hibiscuses... didn't like to be too dry...' (195).

These 'excesses' are bound to plunge Eugene into the tragic dungeon. Instead of society being forced to give way to an inevitable change because of its violent collision with an alien institution as witnessed in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Soile 285), there is a gradual inclination towards revenge. Or what one may even see as eliminating the agents of the kind of change that brings about disorder, imprisonment and suffering. Just like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Beatrice (Mama) decides to take the bull by the horn and initiate the

revenge. Her heartbeat re-echoes Okonkwo's declaration that: 'If they [the other members of society] listen to him [the chiefagent and his cohorts] I shall leave them and plan my own revenge' (*Things Fall Apart* 180). But unlike Okonkwo's society, Mama's society comes to rally round her Kambili, Jaja, Auntie Ifeoma and her family, the lawyers, the prison officers and even the governments appear to be subtly behind her.

The breaking of the figurines on the etagere is very significant as it inaugurates the revenge by the members of the family. The turning of the table is signalled by everything - including the environment:

Everything came tumbling down after Palm Sunday. Howling winds came with an angry rain, uprooting frangipani trees in the front yard.... Even the silence that descended on the house was sudden, as though the old silence had broken and left us with the sharp pieces (251).

Actually, the old silence has broken to usher in a new order. Chief Eugene Achike (Papa) may be seen, in the words of Akwanya, as one of the individuals hampering social intercourse and relationships by following absurd, unenlightened rules, and mechanical behaviour patterns' (46). And once society sees you as such, the next thing is to get rid of you so that the community can go on peacefully.

This also recalls what Anikwenwa, one of the old men in Abba (Papa's home town) who are still traditionalists, told him. When Anikwenwa comes to Papa's house at Christmas, Papa throws him away, saying: '[What] is a worshipper of idols doing in my house? Leave my house!' (69). Annoyed, the man said to Eugene: 'You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave!' (70). This proverb is prophetically fundamental to the tragedy that has now befallen Eugene. Being blinded by the folly of accepting the Western vision without questioning, he is destroyed.

Desai and Nair quote Fanon as saying that colonialism and its effects have some ...pathological effects that must be expelled in order to heal the colonised personality. So severe was the damage...that nothing short of apocalyptic violence would dislodge the colonial stranglehold and fully liberate the colonial subject (249).

What this appears to say is that we must reject (if possible, violently) any vision, way of thinking or critiquing that is set to make us inferior to the West.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, now that the wind of globalization is blowing everywhere, let us infuse into it some elements of *Africanness*. Let us domesticate globalisation and make it work for us. One of the

ways to do this to follow Olaniyan and Quayson's proposition that African literary theory and tradition have in them the potentialities that can be explored and be 'used as an introduction to interest students in literary theory in general' (2). They also observe that students of literary theory and criticism outside Africa have confessed that there is something 'very substantively' at stake in and about the [African] theory' (2). This goes to show that the world is willing to learn from our tradition. So, this is the time to launch ourselves, our visions and aspirations into the global limelight and register irresistible relevance. As we do this, we will not also fail to appropriate the virtuous tenets of globalisation. The observation Amaka makes when she finds out that Father Amadi is going to Germany for a mission work is relevant here:

The white missionaries brought us their god [and their culture], which was the same colour as them, worshipped in their language and packaged in the boxes they made. Now that we take their god [and our own civilisation] back to them, shouldn't we at least repack it? (261)

Father Amadi's response to this very fundamental question shows that he is also an agent of western worldview. He says that 'there is no indigenous culture to pacify, unfortunately' (261) when he travels to Germany. But we should not agree with him there are lots to pacify instead. He also believes that 'only an English name will make ... confirmation valid' (266). He describes the Igbo names Amaka chooses for confirmation as boring. Because of that Amaka does not join the other girls in the ritual. So no matter how kindhearted Father Amadi appears in his dealings with Auntie Ifeoma's family, he cannot be exonerated he is a major proponent of the western vision.

Through globalization and cultural contact, the onus is therefore on us to 'repackage' and set on the global centre-stage, the things that define us, and the things that establish our identity. This is because, as Obiora observes in a rather derogatory tone, 'From darkest Africa now come missionaries who will reconvert the West.' Our reconverting the West means not allowing ourselves to be beclouded by the blinding, deceptive, ideologically-inspired Eurocentric reading of our texts which, according to Olusola, is always 'miscontextually applied' (XI). Let us not allow ourselves to be trapped in what Opatu describes as the 'Oduche complex' (24) a situation where colonial subjects so much get beclouded by western frames of mind that they betray their own culture and civilisation. For us not to be caught in this kind of tragic web, we would have to imbibe a radically new way of thinking. With this new way of thinking would crystal lize a new order that will bring Africa to the envy of the West, instead of the other way round. If we, like Jaja, 'plant purple hibiscuses', we can, as Kambili observes, 'suck the juices

of the flowers' of peace; so that "The new rains will come down... " (298).

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