

ESCAPE AND DISCOVERY OF NEW LIFE IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Dr.N.Jagadeswari

*Assistant Professor (Supervisor), Department of English
Govt Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India*

M.Ayisha Begum

*Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English
Govt Arts College, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India*

Abstract

*African writers have always focused on the vacillating nature of religion and culture in their post-colonial writings. The colonizers left a deep impact on the social, political and cultural aspects of the colonized. Their writings exhibited a sense of constant escape from the alien religion and culture, which resulted in the complete devastation of their own tradition. While the first generation African writers were keen on revealing their inability and helplessness, the third generation writers have tried their best to recuperate the past that was distorted and suggested new ways of life to move further. These post-colonial approaches in African writings resulted in getting back to their roots. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a coming of age novel, which addresses the negotiation of the past and the future. This paper aims to investigate how Adichie explores the concept of escape and discovery of new life in post-colonial Nigeria. This is with a view of exposing how Adichie engages with these concepts in her examination of the Nigeria's social, political, cultural and religious terrain during civil war.*

Key words: *Post-colonial, escape, discovery, social, cultural.*

Introduction

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* falls under the rubric of writing termed third generation Nigerian writing. These writings focus on cultural hybridization, an increasing trans-national consciousness and an articulation of various developments in post-colonial Nigeria. Writers like Adichie, who are born and grown after Nigeria's independence in 1960, represents the experiences of their parents and their own generation in their writings. Adichie's writing reflects an attempt at narrating the African experience, the struggles associated with colonialism and its relics of denigration and oppression which seem to remain visible features of post-independence Africa. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* displays certain ideological persuasions which express certain socio-political and cultural commitment. It is nation and cultural centered in its thematic preoccupations. Elleke Boehmer asserts that:

...postcolonial writer is more likely to be a cultural traveler, or an 'extra-territorial', than a national. Ex-colonial by birth, 'third world' in cultural interest, cosmopolitan in almost every other way, he or she works within the precincts of the Western metropolis while at the same time retaining thematic and/or political connection with a national background. (Boehmer 233)

Adichie chronicles coming of age story of Kambili in post-colonial Nigeria. Kambili is fifteen years old in the beginning of the novel. Adichie uses first person narrative technique, where the reader is able to perceive the story

through the eyes of the narrator. The narrator is the protagonist Kambili. In the very opening chapter the reader is exposed to the constraint way of living of Kambili. Kambili's description of her house reveals how much she is kept away from the outer world, "The compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street" (Adichie 9). The compound wall is a symbolic representation of her solitude living laid by her Papa. The concept to be 'freed' and to escape into a new life is hinted in the very beginning of the novel.

Papa Eugene, father of Kambili is a devout catholic. He is a well known philanthropist and a gentleman in the town of Enugu. He is respected by the religious personalities and Western missionaries in his town. He owns factories and runs a newspaper named '*standard*'. Eugene's character at home is completely on the contrary. Kambili's household is full of violence, physical abuse and silence. Eugene represents colonial rule, which oppressed the colonized. Kambili, her brother Jaja and her Mama Beatrice strive under the regime of Eugene. His demonic nature and his callousness stem out from the pure religious and colonial beliefs. Eugene inflicts his wife and children with brutal punishments, when they cross the boundaries laid by him. Eugene personally assumes that any opportunity or freedom given to his children will lead them astray.

Kambili is never allowed to think beyond the prescriptions laid by her Papa. In spite of all the physical abuses, Kambili hero-worships her Papa. Adichie subtly asserts the point of Western attraction on the natives. Julie Mullaney rightly says, "Kambili's growth is complicated by the position of her father" (Mullaney 49). While Eugene represents colonialism, Kambili represents the natives. The natives are awe-inspired by the language and the Western etiquettes of the colonizers. Colonizers inflicted their religion on the natives, like how Eugene without any reasoning inflicts his own violent religion on his family members. Kambili and Jaja are compelled to blindly follow the religious restrictions of their Papa. Once when Beatrice, Kambili's mother suffered miscarriage after she was violently assaulted by Eugene, he instructed his children to recite sixteen different novenas for Mama's forgiveness. Kambili never tried to ponder over the logic of her Mama's forgiveness. She believes in everything what her Papa says. "I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for" (Adichie 36).

Kambili's constant fear of her Papa almost made her dumb. She is always seen gripped with silence throughout the novel. The silence and her inability to speak her mind is the outcome of her father's abuse. Nevertheless she aims to maintain the dignified image of her Papa in public. She never shares her ideas with her classmates even at her school. Her classmates called her by name 'backyard snob', since she does not mingle with anyone. Her isolation at home haunts her at school too. When her friend Ezinne asks her to stay for a while after school bell to socialize with her friends, she does not explain that she is not allowed to stay out of her father's fear. Kambili's childhood is altogether devoid of laughter and emotion. Her upbringing is not a normal one.

Kambili consciously never wanted to be freed or to be escaped from his tyrant father, until she met her aunt Ifeoma. Ifeoma is a widow and the only sister of Eugene. Due to religious contradictions, Eugene severed his ties with sister Ifeoma. For the first time in her life Kambili goes to Nsukka to stay at her aunt Ifeoma's house. Nsukka is the place where Kambili discovers a new life that is unknown to her till the age of fifteen. She is exposed to a normal life, where everyone has their own opinion. Though Ifeoma is poor, she has given equal rights to her children. Kambili was brought up in an ambience, where female voice is suppressed. She is used to the physical abuses of her father. She is also accustomed to the constant submission of her mother. Though Jaja is only two years elder to Kambili, Jaja is more practical. Jaja being a male,

feels very comfortable to enjoy the environment free from his father's surveil at their aunt's house.

Kambili and Jaja are exposed to everything that is culturally native at Nsukka. Kambili's cousin Amaka is of her same age. Kambili notices that Amaka has better knowledge of the social and political aspects of Nigeria. Kambili's horizon towards her religion and culture broadens. When she was with her father her perspective towards her grandfather Papa Nnukwu was of a 'heathen'. Papa Nnukwu was the only character in the novel, one who is stuck to his religion. He refused to leave his ancestral religion and to accept Christianity. He was completely ostracized by his son Eugene. Eugene calls him a 'heathen'. When Kambili comes in terms with Papa Nnukwu at Nsukka, she notices Papa Nnukwu's way of worship and wonders that his way of worship is similar to the way she worships. She discovers that her grandfather is a 'traditionalist' and not a 'heathen' as addressed by her Papa.

Adichie contrasts the oppressive silence in Enugu and ever ringing laughter in Nsukka. Kambili tries to sense her identity as a girl and imbibes the freedom beyond the silence and patriarchal frameworks of identification. Adichie tries at connoting the discovery of new life full of emotions and expressions. Kambili's hesitation at first is defended with her father's fear. Later her narrative reveals that she longs to be an active participant with her cousins. "I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way they did, but my lips held stubbornly together." (Adichie 141)

Aunt Ifeoma plays a vital role in the life of Kambili in discovering a new life. Ifeoma's character is contrasted with that of her brother Eugene. When Kambili says, 'Aunt Ifeoma was tall as Papa' this shows that she has an equal commend in moulding Kambili towards the discovery of new life. Kambili, who was exposed to a meek woman like her mother, 'Mama whispered', 'tight smile', 'lips were pale', all these expressions made Beatrice a dull and submissive character and it shows how she is helpless under her husband Eugene. 'stop being grateful', 'her voice was slightly raised', 'Life begins when marriage ends', all such comments of Ifeoma reveals that she is a free thinker and is as bold as her brother. She displays great determination as a single mother to three children.

Kambili notices that aunt Ifeoma's Christianity is full of love. Ifeoma's children are brought up in a free environment, where everyone is given their own space. Kambili is taken aback when she notices that her cousins

Amaka, Obiora and Chima move freely with their mother. They joke, laugh, tease together. They are encouraged to ask questions and draw conclusions on politics, culture and religion. At the same time Ifeoma draw lines on their flight meticulously when they cross their limits. When Amaka asks her mother whether Kambili and Jaja are abnormal? She tells her daughter that she can have her own opinions but she must treat her cousins with respect. Unlike her brother, Ifeoma respects her father's religion and tradition too. In spite of being a devout Christian, she allows her children to question the nature of faith. Ifeoma inspires Kambili and Jaja to reconsider their faith and to question their own upbringing.

Kambili and Jaja become aware of the military coups and its repercussions. Though at Enugu they were hinted about these political changes in Nigeria by their Papa, they begin to perceive the crisis from a common man's point of view at Nsukka. They face fuel shortages, pay stoppages, strikes at medical clinics, blackouts and rising food prices and how these issues affect livelihood of common man. Kambili and Jaja are surprised to notice that their cousins are outspoken and critical on the current government in Nigeria. Adichie juxtaposes the newspaper '*standard*' and Eugene's children. The newspaper run by Eugene is very critical of the government whereas his children are made speechless. Eugene's newspaper editor Ade Coker once when teasing Kambili and Jaja says, "Imagine what the *standard* (newspaper) would be if we were all quiet." (Adichie 58)

Kambili discovers her femininity and her sexual awakening when she meets Father Amadi. He is a Nigerian-born priest. He is loved by all youngsters at Nsukka. Father Amadi is a representation of a modern priest one who is loyal to his religion as well as considerate to his native tradition. His religion has a blend of Westernization and the local Igbo tradition. He encourages Kambili to come out of the shell framed by her father and to perceive the world full of love and freedom. Father Benedict is a religious figure whom Kambili seen growing. A white, conservative Catholic, who was strict and calls for seriousness all the time like her Papa. Father Benedict was keen on eschewing all the Igbo practices in church. On the contrary Father Amadi respects his Nigerian roots. Father Amadi's young charming physique and his 'unpriestly' dressings made Kambili to fall in love with him.

The novel ends by Kambili and Jaja realizing their Nigerian roots. They wanted to come out of the strict and serious religion which demands perfection. The end of the tyrant rule of the colonizers is symbolically represented in the death of Eugene. Mama Beatrice poisons him to relieve herself and her children from the tyranny of Eugene. They find solace in adopting a religion which is blended with their Igbo traditions. They come to terms that faith is both simpler and more complex. Adichie is successful in criticizing the brutal colonial rule in her Nigeria, which thwarted her Igbo tradition. In spite of all the Western implications on the Nigerians, they were seen always vacillating in between their local tradition and the new religion of the colonizers. The younger generation settles down in picking up a midway between the two.

Conclusion

Adichie incorporates bildungsroman genre into the novel to bring out a vivid picture of the growing minds in post-colonial Nigeria. And all through this novel, what comes across is a sense of belonging to the native culture; whether writing about the crippling effects of religious fanaticism and dictatorial parenting or the harrowing experiences of Nigerian civil war, the reader's attention is drawn to the religious and cultural milieu of Nigeria. The pure indigenous history is irrecoverable and colonialism collapses under its own weight. This is the struggle of the young Nigerians to move further while adopting new cultural and religious unifications. The characters find solace in getting back to their roots, which give them a sense of real meaning to proceed further in social, political and religious crisis.

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