

## CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *THE PURPLE HIBISCUS*: AN ALLEGORICAL STORY OF MAN'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

### I

#### INTRODUCTION

The landscape of African literary works is dotted with icons that have tried to dispel the Westerners' condescending attitude that Africa is a dark continent without history, without civilization and without hope of ever moving forward. To these biased and self-acclaimed Messiahs, the main task of the West is "weaning these ignorant millions from their horrid ways". (Conrad, 1995:40) It is, therefore, the sincere belief of Caucasian historian and literary artists, as exemplified in the opinion of Mockler-Ferryinan:

Of the ancient history of the Niger countries there is scarcely anything interesting to write, and though they have doubtless been peopled by Negroes for countless ages, what changes the land has seen must remain forever unknown... This region shows no signs of having been more than the habitat of beings superior to wild beasts among which they dwelt merely in the fact that they lived in huts of mud and grass and that they were able to communicate by word of mouth. (Afigbo, 1983:436)

With this belief firmly ingrained in the minds of the Westerners, their missionaries, colonial administrators, and merchants trooped out to the wild and untamable continent, full of wild animals and vegetation, to bring the light of the Western world to the dark-skinned subhuman with a flat nose. But the cost of that expedition to Europe is the burst of their claim of superiority as a myth. Africans who try to resist the rape, the plundering, the pillaging of their erstwhile peaceful continent and the violations of their right to peaceful existence are tagged and labeled 'rebels', 'criminals', 'enemies' and 'savages' and exterminated. The brutality of African colonialism compels the Polish writer, Joseph Conrad, to comment that it is 'the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration'. And that beneath the superego of the cultured Westerner, the id, which is the primitive

instinctive needs is still active. One of the characters in the **Heart of Darkness** comments on the actions of the symbolic Mr. Kurz in the darkest continent, Africa:

I am not disclosing any trade secrets. In fact the manager said afterwards that Mr. Kurz's methods had ruined the district. I have no opinion on that point, but I want you clearly to understand that there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts; that there was something wanting in him – some small matter which, when the pressing *need arose*, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence. (1995:85-86)

The destruction and desecration of Africa and African traditional values is not only to be blamed on the gold diggers, the European merchants, but also on the colonialists and their missionaries whose policies, teachings and doctrines are calculated to negate African culture and beliefs. The Kenyan-born writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, reflects on the stealthy introduction of Christianity with its contradictions, which later undermined the African Traditional Religion and its hold on the people, amidst the Mau-Mau struggle in Kenya:

About Jesus, they could not at first understand, for how could it be that God would let himself be nailed to a tree? The whiteman spoke of the love that passeth all understanding. Greater love hath no man than this, he read from the little black book, that a man lay down his life for his friends.(1967:12)

The activities of the Western merchants, colonialists and missionaries shattered the sleepy continent of Africa, the sons and daughters of Africa left at the crossroad of two divergent cultures. The new African neither fully assimilates the European culture nor his African one. He develops a dual personality, which truncates his perception of African values and environment. He is neither white nor black and Achebe recaptures this conflict in the African in an interview:

Yes, what I think is the basic problem of a new African country is really what you might call a 'crisis in the soul'. We have been subjected – we have subjected ourselves too- to this period during which we have accepted everything alien as good and practically everything local or native as inferior. I could give illustrations of when I was growing, the attitude of our parents, Christina parents,

to Nigerian dances, Nigerian handicrafts; and the whole society during this period began to look down on itself... (Duerden & Pieterse, 1972:78)

It is a truism the popular saying that there must be an end to everything under the sun. And this is especially so in human affairs. The time came for the European traders, colonizers and missionaries to pack their bag and baggage and leave the shores of Africa; their mission of civilization either cut short by nationalists fighters or negotiators and mediators at conference tables in Europe. However, the first two left, handing over their business interests and the reins of governments to black slaves and admirers, who stepped into their masters' shoes to continue with the exploitation and oppression of their people. This group of black parasites, Professor Chris L. Wanjala represents thus in his "Foreward" in **Imagination of Poets: An Anthology of African Poems:**

The leaders from the continent have a credibility problem. They are ministers whom donors are raising their eyebrows about as they strut the G-8 world clad in Western suits and bowl in hand as they beg for foreign aid on behalf of their constituents only to come back here and spread on their own dining tables as personal loot. (Onochie, et al, 2005:13)

The white missionaries completed their work when by compulsion and persuasion brought up Africans, who readily and willingly reject their traditional religion, their ancestors and their customs. To be a Christian and a civilized African, one must discard his African identify:

He was baptized when he started school and was given this name, Enebiri. He took offence when you called him Enebiri and if you were a friend he would tell you politely that his name was Gilbert and he wished to be called that. (Nwapa, 1966:85)

African literary writers – poets, novelists and playwrights – are not resting on their oars in the portrayal of African cultural values and the decadence and stagnation in post-independent African countries. Chinua Achebe blazes the trail in the exposition of the culture of pre-literate African societies, Umuofia and Umuaro, in **Things Fall Apart** and **Arrow of God**, respectively. These works and a host of others from African cultural novelists have debunked and deflated the Westerner's self-conceited notion that black Africa was a vast expanse of land inhabited by barbarians before

the importation of their own culture. The echoes and voices of African literary artists – Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Ochia Ofeimun, Femi Osofisan, Emeka Nwabueze, Ossie Enekwe – could be heard reverberating in all the lands within the continent, demanding from African leadership to give account of their stewardship.

A new voice has been added to the already sagging ones – that of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In her debut novel, the **Purple Hibiscus** with its setting in Enugu, Abba and Nsukka, she tells the allegorical story of a family, a university and a nation that are run by dictators and the struggle of some of the characters to free themselves and the others from the deadly stranglehold of the demonized patriarchs.

## II THE FREEDOM OF WORSHIP AND SUBJECTION FROM INHUMAN TREATMENT

Those who profess to favour freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.... *Fredrick Doglass*

Like Achebe’s Okonkwo, who ‘ruled his household with a heavy hand’ (1958:9), Chimamanda presents the image of a dictatorial patriarch, Eugene Achike, whose tyrannical headship of his family sends shivers into the spines of his family members. The time frame within which the two tyrants run their families are different. Okonkwo’s is within a period in the history of Igboland when there is no rule of law to curb his excesses; Achike’s is within the twenty-first century when there is the existence of a constitution and other statutes that whittles the powers of the patriarchs. Besides, the two share the same motive – fear – for their dictatorial behaviour. But while Okonkwo’s fear arises out of the fact the he does not want to be seen as a weakling like his late father, Unoka, who could not provide for his family and died a debtor, Eugene Achike’s fear arises as a result of the indoctrination from white missionaries. He does not want his family to be stained with any speck of sin. The mortal fear of sin has been ingrained in his memory when as a domestic servant to a white priest his hands were soaked in boiled water as a punishment for masturbation. This unholy act left him neurotic and brutalized. The neurotic father, whom the naïve narrator, Kambili, says that as he subjects his family to series of brutalities: ‘There were stories in his eyes that I

would never know'. (Adichie, 2004:42) And also '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'. (p. 102).

With this terrible experience at the back of his mind he strives to be pure and holy in his life – both in business and at home. He is a Catholic who must attend mass every Sunday; he must make sure that his family receives holy communion because it is only mortal sin that can stop a believer from that: he reports other members of the congregation who abstains from taking holy communion on two consecutive Sundays to the parish priest; he has to make handsome donations to the church and to homes for the motherless babies and veterans; he has to pray before and after meals for several minutes that at times their food get cold; he devoutly prays his rosaries; he goes only to celebrations organized by the church; he listens only to Christian songs and associates only with Christian believers. In his pursuit of a devout Catholic life, he is compared with the best in the Christendom. The innocent narrator says:

During his sermon, Father Benedict usually referred to the Pope, Papa, and Jesus in that order. He used papa to illustrate the gospels. When we let our light shine before man, we are reflecting Christ's Triumphant Entry, he said that Palm Sunday....Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us have stood up for the truth? How many of us have reflected the Triumphant Entry? (p. 5)

Ironically, there is inconsistency between the man's private and public life. In public, he is a loving, civilized man, who holds the wife tenderly in the church; a man whom many women are eager and willing to throw themselves at; a man whom many parents are willing to give their daughters without demanding bride price; his children are the envy of their cousins and classmates for having such a rich father. Their Hausa gate man at Abba enviously tells them "our pather was the best Big Man he had ever seen, the best emfloyer he had ever had. Did we know our pather faid his children's school pees? Did we know our pather had helfed his wipe get the messenger job at the local government oppice? We were lucky to have such a pather." (p. 103) Eugene championed the freedom of the populace that he received an award from a human right group for allowing his newspaper, *Standard*, to relentlessly criticize the actions of the draconian, military junta. He piously tells his listeners that "what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a

renewed democracy". The editor of his newspaper, Ade Coker, in a proscript in italics calls him a man of integrity, the bravest man I know.

As Kambili, the innocent narrator, tells her story like Dennis in Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba*, the mature reader sees in between the line to know that this staunch defender of the basic freedom of the people vehemently denies his family any measure of freedom. Kambili describes their yard as being spacious to take in a hundred people dancing atilogwu. However, the 'compound walls topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street'. (p. 9) And that flowers used to beautify the yard during rainy season gives out 'sickly scent of their flowers'. (p. 9) Their house is beautiful and spacious. The rooms in the house are exquisitely furnished. Their meals are rich and sumptuous. Despite all these, the impression one gets is that this compound is a prison and the people living inside it are prisoners. There is no freedom for the inmates of the imposing building, who only speak for a purpose and in whispers. Their footsteps cannot be heard. They can neither interact freely with outsiders nor with other family members. Though the house boasts of an imposing satellite dish, a television and a stereo, they neither watch the television nor listen to any music from the stereo. The two children cannot play or converse with other children. Kambili's classmates misunderstand her predicament and call her a 'backyard snob' and their cousin, Amaka, wonders 'whether they are normal'. The family's life is routinely scheduled. The children's routine consists of praying, going to school, eating and sleeping.

As if the curbing of their freedom of movement and association is not enough, they suffer also domestic violence. The private life of Eugene Achike, which he carefully conceals from the public with the help of his wife and children, is the fact that he batters his wife and children. He violently beats his wife because he has been brutalized. This is the experience every Negro - both in Diaspora and in Africa during colonialism - has experienced. Cecilia A. Noss in her critical appraisal of the problem of black manhood in Ernest J. Gaines works offers this opinion:

In southern America, even after slavery was abolished, the black man is expected to 'keep his place'. The result of this is many turn their anger and frustrations on their own black people: They draws (your manhood) out of you or they make you a beast - make you use it in a brutish way. You use it on a woman without caring for her, you use it on your children, you use it on other men, you use it on yourself....' (*Emenyonu*, 1987:152)

This dizzying and traumatic experience of the Negroid race is corroborated in the novel of another black man, who writes in his autobiographical work:

The things that influenced me as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behaviour than that which I knew. (Wright, 1980:190)

Adichie shows that violence begets violence. She shows that that the brutality, which Eugene Achike suffered in his travail to acquire the white man's way, has turned him into a horrendous brute. He directs this brutality on his family in the name of Christianity. He beats Jaja, his son, until his little finger is paralyzed for failing two-catechism questions that makes him not to be the first in the class. He batters his wife several times that her face and eyes look like black-purple colour of an overripe avocado. He brutally assaults her several times when she was pregnant that the fetuses aborted. Beatrice Achike narrates her ordeal to her children, Auntie Ifeoma and her children: "You know that table where we keep the family Bible, *nne?* Your father broke it on my belly", and that her "blood finished on that floor even before he took her to St. Agnes hospital. (p. 248). He beats Kambili, Jaja and their mother because they made cornflakes for Kambili to eat before a Eucharistic fast. She uses a simile to compare the bestiality of his flogging with Fulani nomads. She describes it thus: 'Papa was like a Fulani nomad – although he did not have their spare, tall body – as he swing his belt at Mama, Jaja and me, muttering that the devil would not win'. (p. 102). He beats her into a state of unconsciousness for desperately trying to salvage the shredded painting of her paternal grandfather, whom he calls a heathen. The peak of his brutality towards the family is seen in his act of scalding his children's feet because they slept under the same roof with his own father because he was a traditionalist, and not of his own faith.

I saw the moist steam before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arch to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding; I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed. (p. 194)

Eugene Achike is a man, whom the white priests brought him up to reject the custom of his people. Several African writers have frowned upon this deprecation of African values. Renè Maran in *Batouala* writes:

The custom! The elders pointed out that there was now a tendency to willingly forget custom. The young, and in general all those who served the whites, looked on custom with derision. (1938:93)

Eugene Achike has received Western education and has become a cultured black man. He rejects his father and calls him a pagan because he refuses to be converted to Catholicism. He forbids his children from visiting him. The old man has to live in abject poverty while the son is a very wealthy man. He refuses to attend the father's funeral because he died a heathen. He bars his father from coming to his compound because he is a pagan. And he scalds the children's feet for daring to sleep under the same roof with their grandfather. There are so much ironies and inconsistencies in Eugene's Christian life.

He violates some of the provisions of the tenth commandment, which is part of Judeo culture that is in the old testament of his Bible and some of the qualities of a good Christian as enumerated by Jesus Christ, whom Father Benedict compares him with.

Adichie presents the reader with a man who strives to shake off vestiges of his cultural identity. He despises speaking the Igbo language, listening to Igbo song, abstains from joining Igbo choruses in the church, looks down on Igbo priests who sing Igbo songs and neither receive holy communion from them nor make his confessions to them because they are not 'spiritual enough'. Eugene is a man who craves to identify himself and his family with the Western values. He speaks with British accent, especially when he interacts with the whites. He prefers employing a white reverend sister to a black one as the daughter's private tutor. He keeps the framed picture of his father-in-law in his house because he is as a catechist and a knight. He prefers the villagers who speak English with heavy Igbo accent to the ones who speak Igbo because the latter had 'good sense'. His wife and children cannot genuflect to greet the traditional ruler of his town, but they must kiss the bishop's ring. He cannot visit the traditional ruler because even though he is a Christian, he allows pagan rites in his compound, but he visits Father Benedict every Sunday in his parish house. He unwillingly accepts the traditional title of *omelora* after discussing it with the priest and insisting that pagan rites must be waived, but he is ready and willing to buy his sister and her husband a brand new car if they can agree to the investiture of knighthood on them. Like Enoch whom the villagers call 'The Outsider who wept louder than the bereaved' (Achebe, 1958:131), old Anikwenwa he threw out of his house because he



is a pagan warns him: "You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave".

Adichie shows that a man with such excesses – imposition of suffocating restriction and brutalization and dehumanization of his family – must pay for them. The whole structure of the novel is rooted in irony and there are several ironical situations. Eugene Achike, in battering the family insists that he wants them to attain the state of perfection, but in killing him, they seem to be imperfect. This shows that his brutal training of the family is inadequate.

But before the victims are able to free themselves, they must undertake a physical and symbolic journey to Nsukka, where the aunt and her children live. It is while spending a short holiday with them that they see the inadequacies in their family. The journey is the beginning of the end of their tolerance of their father's brutality and the acceptance of African values as embodied in their grandfather and Amaka, their cousin. This visit is the first time they are staying outside their exquisite prison called home. It is here that they discover that there is no love in their own home, and that they have been living in dread and shadow of their father. Kambili narrates:

Laughter always rang out in Aunty 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. (p. 140)

It is at Nsukka that there is both physical and spiritual growth in them. It is there that Kambili discovers that Jaja has developed broad shoulders and hair is sprouting out on his chest. With the help of Father Amadi and her children, Aunty Ifeoma has to give them a more positive training than the one they received at home. They learn to interact with others instead of stuttering when people talk to them; they learn how to indulge in recreational activities; Kambili learns how to wash plates and cook, and Jaja shears flowers and washes his aunty's dusty vehicle.

It is also at Nsukka that they come to understand the true meaning of religion, not just the Christian religion. They come to understand through Aunty Ifeoma and Father Amadi that a Christian must be tolerant, even with people that do not profess the same faith. And to be a Catholic, one does not need to deny his cultural identity. Their mother, who watches docilely while her and her children are brutalized, also learnt a bitter lesson

at Nsukka. Ifeoma tells her that the situation cannot continue as it is. Besides, Jaja learns from Obiora to defend his mother and sister against their father's domestic violence.

This symbolic journey will restore their dignity as human beings. They are no longer to submit passively like lambs to Eugene Achike's suppression. Adichie's foreshadows this resistance in a snail's struggle for freedom from its cage: 'I wondered if it was the same snail, crawling out, being thrown back in, and then crawling out again. Determined. I wanted to buy the whole basket and set that one snail free'. (p. 238). There is also the struggle for freedom which she describes thus: "He walked up slowly, holding something that turned out a grasshopper, "It is so strong", he said, "I can feel the pressure of its wings." He spread his palm and watched the grasshopper fly off'. (p. 285)

If the lower animals resist being caged, man cannot also be imprisoned for a long time. Kambili described the transformation in her mother when she came to Nsukka after the husband beat her:

Mama's eyes were still glazed, but she looked like a different woman from the one who had come out of the taxi that morning. She looked possessed by a different demon. (p. 250)

Before Jaja takes his responsibility of protecting his mother and sister, there is the undertone that the father's violence has turned him into a violent man, though latent. After Jaja has killed the chicken, Kambili says: 'There was a precision in Jaja, a single-mindedness that was cold, clinical'. (P. 235). There is no doubt that Jaja has been turned into a brute by his father's brutality on the family for she also recounts that in the prison they had to bribe officials for him to get a preferential treatment but 'the wardens moved him here after he spat in a guard's face for no reason at all, ...' (p. 299).

Adichie believes that violence can only stop violence, and those who are agitating for freedom against their oppressors, must be willing to use force if need be. There is the latent violence in him, which can stop their father's violence on them. Eugene does not recognize the son's manhood when he demanded for the keys to his room. After their journey to Nsukka, everything in their lives comes tumbling down. She says:

Even the silence that descended on the house was sudden, as though the old silence had broken and left us with the sharp pieces. When Mama asked Sisi to wipe the floor of the living room, to make sure no dangerous pieces of figurines were left lying somewhere, she did

not lower her voice to a whisper. She did not hide the tiny smile that drew lines at the edge of her mouth. She did not sneak Jaja's food to his room, wrapped in cloth so it would appear that she had simply brought his laundry in. She took him his food on a white tray, with a matching plate. (p. 258)

Eugene Achike recognizes very late that his wife and son are ready to defy his authority. Jaja's defiance is symbolized in the symbol of the purple hibiscus, which bursts out to show its radiant and beautiful flowers. Jaja has grown into a man and he has to meet his father like a man. Kambili looks at the stalemate between father and son thus: "there was a shadow clouding Papa's eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja's eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja's eyes and entered Papa's". (P. 13). And when their mother poisons their father, he takes responsibility for her action for this reason: "I should have taken care of Mama. Look how Obiora balances Auntie Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is. I should have taken care of Mama". (P. 289). He is sent to prison without trial after he claimed he killed the father.

Adichie achieves three things by ending the story where he is jailed. One, he comes out as the defiant king, Jaja of Opobo, who defied the British colonial administrator that sent him on exile as a punishment. His grandfather claims that he is reincarnate of his own father and Jaja himself finds some resemblance between him and his grandfather. The old man defies the son's demand that he be converted to Christianity for him to build him a house, buy him a car and generally improve his lot. He stands out as a man that defies tyrannical power and a defender of his people and their traditional values.

Moreover, in traditional religion and Christianity, it is an abomination for one to murder another human being. Therefore, his imprisonment will serve as a valve for the purgation of the blood of the father whom he claimed he killed.

But most importantly, he is made to fulfill the role of the 'carrier', which is not a novel concept in African religious practices. To the Christians, Jesus Christ is the 'carrier' who washes away the sins of the world. Ironically, it is not the father, whom Father Benedict compares with Christ that reaches this status but the son, Jaja, whom he has battered because of his love of sins. Allegorically, Jaja in his quest for physical and spiritual freedom is raised to the position of a saviour, whom Zulu Sofola in "The 'Carrier' as a Saviour Among the Ife posits:

The victim is usually a 'carrier' and a 'saviour', all in one. He is the one who carries away the sins of the community and whose blood waters the source of life of the community, thereby renewing and preserving it. (Adegbola, 1983:141)

### III

#### THE FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION FOR THE CITIZENS

Prior to the white man's importation of his civilization in the African continent, there existed close-knitted system with which the empires and the peoples rule themselves. In Igboland, there was the absence of any recognizable kings. However, the people successfully governed themselves. For instance, in Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** and **Arrow of God**, there exist a democratic system of governance. At the apex of the decision-making bodies are the men that have distinguished themselves in various professions, the title-holders, the elders, the masquerades. However, whenever there is a serious issue that borders on the survival of the society, a meeting of all the adult male members is summoned and each of them is entitled to be heard. Then the people lived very close to nature, enjoyed the protection of their gods and ancestors, and had a healthy relationship with their neighbours. Richard Taylor in "The Twentieth Century: Contemporary Trends" comments on this peaceful co-existence:

Man is seen to be at one with himself in a traditional society, at one with his fellows, and even at one with the supernatural which is but an extension of temporary existence. (1977:203)

But before the white man left the shores of Africa, he gave birth to hydra-headed monsters, whom Ngugi wa Thiongo described as 'profiteering gods and its ministering angels'. (1997:34). And in the much misunderstood Joyce Cary's novel, **MISTER JOHNSON**, which prompted Achebe's writing of **Things Fall Apart**, he paints an unsavory portrait of an African charlatan and a buffoon who blindly apes the white. The black man in an irritating imitation of his white employers progresses in crime, and at the end of the novel, he loses his job, his wife and his life. Joyce Cary pointed out clearly that Mr. Johnson murdered Gollup, his former employer, after the British ex-soldier-turned trader had brutalized Johnson and the other black servants. He attributed this decadence in the black man to the Western civilization. The road, a symbol of Caucasian

civilization, which Rudbeck spent so much time and money to build, taunts him:

The road itself seems to speak to him. I am smashing up the old Fada – I shall change everything and everybody in it. I am abolishing the old ways, the old ideas, the old law. I am bringing wealth and opportunity for good as well as vice, new powers to men and therefore new conflicts. I am the revolution. I am giving you plenty of trouble already, you governor, and I am going to give you plenty more. I destroy and I make new. What are you going to do about it? I am your idea. You made me, so I suppose you know. (*Cary, 1969:215*)

Adichie shows in the **Purple Hibiscus** that such men with Esau's hand and Jacob's voice are in control of the rein of power in Nigeria. She paints a gory picture of a dictatorial head of state that has a lot in common with the family dictator – both of them are unrestrained and monstrous in the exercise of their power.

The brutality and disorderliness of the military junta and his agents are foreshadowed in the very first few pages of the novel where the naïve narrator makes a distinction between her mother's prayer group members who appreciate the beauty of the flowers and 'plucked' them and the government agent who lacked the sense of aesthetics and just 'yanked' them. The word 'yanked' which she used excites a mental picture of men who are violent.

As the story progresses, this violence of the military head of state and members of his junta is exhibited. A full-grown man is made to frog-jump before the glare of the public for an undisclosed offence by the soldiers. The women are not spared the inhuman treatment meted to the men. Women who protested over the demolition of the stalls in the market are whipped. Kambili describes the violence she experienced in the market that haunted her even after she left the market thus: "A woman lay in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short afro. Her wrapper had come undone and her white underwear showed". (P. 44).

Adichie shows that the unnamed military government is not only indifferent to people and callous, it is also very corrupt. Amidst the grinding poverty in the land, it doles out money to buy the conscience of the opposition and critics. Kambili recalls that the government agents in black jackets, who drove in a pickup truck with federal government plates, and who yanked at the flowers that "... Jaja said they come to bribe Papa, that he had heard them say that their pickup was full of dollars". (p. 9).

Besides, the military head of state violates the citizens' right to life as enshrined in the constitution. Though successive military regimes in Nigeria have always suspended the constitution and ruled with decrees and edicts, the artist points out the insensitivity and the incongruity in the actions of the military junta. This is a government that executes drug-traffickers in public, yet the same head of state and his wife are said to be drug barons.

One of the greatest fundamental rights of the citizens, which every military government tries to curb, is the freedom of expression or speech. One of the first actions they carry on is to gag the press in order to insulate themselves from criticisms and prying eyes of the press and the public. Journalists have always fought the gagging of free press by whatever government that is in power:

It is contradiction in terms for a government to short-circuit the rule of law and abuse the rights of the press, which is an essential democratic element. It is an egregious mark of interference to shut down newspaper houses, hound journalists into jail and dangle the sword of Damocles over the press. (*Igiebor, 1988:10*).

The military men from the time they take the mantle of leadership after their successful coup make it clear to the press that their criticisms cannot be tolerated. The timorous souls among them go into their shells in the face of the soldiers' intimidation. Ade Coker personifies the spirit of the freedom fighters. As Jaja determines to free the victims – his mother and sister – from the grim crutches of domestic violence, Ade Coker offers himself as a sacrificial lamb in order to liberate his countrymen from the vice-like hold of a military dictator. The two of them are used as 'carriers' for the liberation of those that are in bondage. Ade Coker is cut down by a letter bomb sent by the head of state, while his daughter is with him.

Though Ade Coker is killed, the seeds of knowledge, which he planted in the citizens, coupled with the harsh realities of the head of state's trampling of the citizens, germinated purple hibiscus. As the novel ends, Kambili informs the reader that the country's dictator 'died atop a prostitute, foaming at the mouth and jerking...' (P. 297). Sadly enough, the death of the dictatorial head of state is not the end of the country's suffering as corruption continues even under the new civilian government. Kambili says: 'There is much more that Mama and I do not talk about. We do not talk about the huge checks we have written, for bribes to judges and policemen and prison guards'. (p. 297). This statement shows the

unending cycle of hopelessness and corruption in every African country like the sad note in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, where the omniscient narrator says that after the military coup that toppled the government, it is business as usual. To Nigerians, there is no difference between military and civilian governments as both of them unleash untold violence on the populace. Charles Ukeje in his article, "From Aba to Ugborodo: Gender Identity and Alternative Discourse of Social Protest Among Women in the Oil Delta of Nigeria" postulates:

In another case, the administration demonstrated how it planned to react to the surge of violent conflicts in the Oil Delta when it ordered troops to raze the village of Odi, close to Yenogoa, the capital of Bayelsa State, as a reprisal for the killing of seven soldiers by bandits terrorizing the village and its neighbours. (2004: 82).

#### IV

### VIOLATION OF THE RIGHT TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

The brutality and violence in the nation also engulfs the University, which Obiora aptly describes as a 'microcosm of the society'. The military dictator in his characteristic style appoints a sole administrator to run the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. With this appointment, the university with its motto "To restore the dignity of man" becomes a place where the dignity of man is squashed. The sole administrator runs this academic world in the same high-handed military fashion the state dictator runs the government. There is no water supply, no light, the facilities in the campus are either ill maintained, or not maintained at all. The salaries of workers are not paid and the workers are on strike. It is in this state of affairs that Papa-Nnukwu died because the medical personnel at the University's medical centre is on strike.

This situation within the campus creates a palpable tension. Most of the lecturers keep quiet for fear of either brutal reprisals or loss of their jobs. Some of them left for greener pastures abroad. The very few, like Aunty Ifeoma, who are bold enough to criticize the system are sacked. And when the situation becomes intolerable to the students, they rioted, destroying the University's property. The University is closed indefinitely and the students ordered to leave the campus. Instead of its administration looking inwards to find the cause of the problem, it decides to make scapegoats of its critics. Plain-clothed policemen are sent to Aunty Ifeoma's

house to intimidate her. Kambili says that the men without a search warrant:

... did not look inside the drawers they flung open, they just threw the clothes and whatever else was inside on the floor. They overturned all the boxes and suitcases in Aunty Ifeoma's room, but they did not rummage through the contents. They scattered, but they did not search (p. 231).

The rioting students did not kill the sole administrator because he and 'his wife were smuggled out in the boot of an old Peugeot 404....' (P. 229). The author only subjects them to humiliation and for them to perceive the protest of a people who are hemmed in. Adichie does that for a purpose, because the dictatorial leadership in the University will not be in existence if there is no dictatorial headship in the society, since it is a diminutive representative of the society. In fact, the University is sick because the society is sick.

## V

### THE EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN FROM INJURIOUS CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Adichie raises feminist issues in her work. But in their treatment, she is not brazen as Flora Nwapa in **One is Enough** or Buchi Enecheta in **Second Class Citizen** and **Joys of Motherhood**. She adopts the quiet, clear, persuasive and resolute voice of Ifeoma Okoye and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. Yet, the effect is still the same for after reading **Purple Hibiscus**, one wonders why a woman should stay in a marriage that is threatening to claim her life? Why should she not use contraceptives after several violently aborted pregnancies? Why should she be seen gliding like a ghost, without any voice in at least – the matters that concern her children? And why should her position in the house only be in the kitchen, either cooking or serving food?

The answers are not far-fetched. The African cultural practices dictate that once a woman is married, she remains married. Akueke in Achebe's **Arrow of God**, though battered by the husband must go back to his house. And in **Things Fall Apart**, the *egwuegwu* masquerades, which are regarded as the spirits of the ancestors, with their vast knowledge of the tradition of Umuofia delivers this judgment in favour of Uzowulu, a notorious wife-beater: '... if your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him....' (p. 66).



It is not in doubt that it is because of this cultural attitude that Beatrice Achike stays put despite the fact that her husband turns her and her children into punching bags.

John R. Hinnells claims in *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* that the history of the modern women's movement has deep roots in religion. It originally drew much inspiration from the Judeo-Christian belief that both male and female are created in the image of God and are called as equal heirs to God's kingdom does not hold water in the African context, even if it does in the Western world. (p. 186) Beatrice Achike tenaciously cherishes the Christian doctrine that only death can separate her from her husband. In Igbo culture within which the novel is set, there is no room for divorce. Akachi Adimora – Ezeigbo espouses this view through one of her female characters:

I dread the stigma of divorce. The embarrassing sniggers of people; the finger pointing... How can I face life as a woman alone, a single woman on the threshold of middle age, after being married for so many years? Do you know what a woman faces in our culture, as a divorcee? You are pitied. You are scorned. Men come to try you out. They drop you. And they vanish. That is if you have been shouldering their burdens. But if they have been keeping you, they simply kick you out. (2002:126)

Kambili's mother sits tightly in a marriage where there is no love, no consideration and no fellow feeling because she fears that even if she packs out of the house, a horde of women will gladly step into her shoes. She tells her sister-in-law.

Where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? She did not wait for Auntie Ifeoma to respond. Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying a bride price? (p. 250)

Adichie also raises the feminist's issue of an African woman's life being synonymous with motherhood. Beatrice Achike has two children – Kambili and Jaja – but she believes that her position is not yet secure in her husband's house. And in her culture, a woman is expected to produce so many children, especially boys. This is because it is only male children that inherit houses from their fathers. One of the women says, "Nekene, see the boy that will inherit his father's riches!" (p. 91) With only a son, she feels threatened, particularly as the people from the husband's kindred

advises him to get another wife who would produce more children for him. Her slippery position drives her to conceive even as a middle-aged woman. However, all the pregnancies after Kambili are aborted because of her husband's violence on her during the period of gestation.

Motherhood, as a primary issue in a woman's life in Igbo culture, is not confined to the uneducated or not-so-educated women. Aunty Ifeoma is dismayed when one of her undergraduate students informs her proudly: "I'm not sure I will come back to school when we reopen. I want to have a baby first. I don't want him to think that he married me to have an empty home...". Furthermore, Beatrice Achike does not have any say in whatever concerns her and her children. She does not have any opinion either on the husband's social and business life. She cannot decide on what the children should wear; the school they should go to; who teaches them private lessons; where they should go; whom they will visit; or who visits them; the time for them to wash their dresses or read their books or take their siesta. Her husband draws the schedules of activities for the children from dusk to dawn and from Monday through Sunday. The only place she decides what to do is in the kitchen. Outside the kitchen, she cannot exercise any will of her own. The only time she decides to stay in the car while the others visit Father Benedict because she feels like vomiting, the consequences haunted Kambili for a long time. She confides to the reader: 'We cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red water colour all the way downstairs. Jaja scrubbed while I wiped'. (p. 33).

Beatrice Achike conforms to the traditional role her custom and Christianity assigned to her in the face of her husband's incessant leaching of domestic violence on her and her children. Her husband in his brutality is unaware he has pushed his victim to the brink of insanity until she murders him to free her family from the unbearable load he has placed on them for several years.

## VI

### THE CHARACTERS' RESPONSE TO THE DICTATORS' CIRCUMSCRIPTION OF THEIR FREEDOM

Chimamanda Adichie deliberately draws two sets of characters based on their response to the circumscribing of their freedom. These sets of characters exist concurrently in places – states, family and the university – where the dictators hold sway. Beatrice Achike, the other editors and publishers of national newspapers and Professor Okafor belong to the

first group. These are the people who are ready to accommodate tyranny and brutality in their lives because they are afraid of losing one thing or the other. For instance, Beatrice is afraid of either resisting her husband's violence on the family or packing out because she cannot think of his marrying another wife or her living outside his home as a divorcee. Besides, the military junta cowers the other journalists down because they cannot afford to lose their businesses, or imprisonment or being murdered. Professor Okafor submits to the violence of the sole administrator because of fear of losing his job or being manhandled by the administrator's agents.

However, Adichie points out that lily-livered men and women who keep quiet in the face of a dictatorial leadership are foolhardy to think they can escape unscathed before the brute power of the tyrant. The husband traumatizes Beatrice and her children until she decides to eliminate him. The journalists may save their media but they experience the raw power the military dictator wields. And Professor Okafor, on his own part, pays the supreme price of withdrawing into his shell in the face of a tyrannical administration. His son steals his examination papers and sells them to students. He beats him until he loses his front tooth but he cannot wipe the stigma of the son's behaviour.

The other set of characters are the healthy ones and these cannot burge an inch to the naked power of the tyrant. Jaja, Ade Coker and Auntie Ifeoma belong to this group. These characters believe that the tyranny of the dictator cannot go unchallenged. They are determined to clip the wings of the brutal patriarch's and save themselves and the other victims. Before Jaja goes to Nsukka, the seed of rebellion against his father's tyranny is already dormant in him. When their mother tells them that she is pregnant, he confides in Kambili: "We will take care of the baby; we will protect him". (p. 23) Several times, he claims responsibility for his sister's acts or omissions in order to take her punishment. The ultimate of this show of protection, love and manhood is his acceptance of the punishment for his mother's murder of his father. He goes to prison but there is hope of true freedom for him and his family as they will visit places that symbolize freedom for them and visit the people they love and that inspired them to undertake the arduous journey to set themselves free. The novelist ends the narrative through Kambili's dream and hope for a brighter future:

We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we'll go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma, I say. We will plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I will plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flower. (p. 30).

Moreover, Ade Coker is a man that symbolizes the spirit of freedom that can never be quenched. Though he is imprisoned several times by the military, his newspapers confiscated and proscribed, thrown into jail, burning cigarettes snuffed on his back, beaten and traumatized, yet he refused the government overtures, as he continues to publish the truth in his editorial of **Standard**, which is critical of the junta's action and omissions. He dies in the defence of truth by his publication of the dictator's murder of Nwankiti Ogechi. The Commonwealth of Nations sanctioned Nigeria for that serious violation of the right to life of a citizen. The beast in the state house sends his reprisal to Ade Coker via a letter bomb that explodes and shreds his body as he tries to open it. The tragedy of Ade's death is not a personal tragedy; it is the tragedy of the whole country as its citizens sit back and watch the murder of their freedom fighter and human rights activist. The trauma his young daughter suffered that left her speechless for months is an indication of the trauma of several generations in the country if the brutality of the men in power is not checkmated.

Adichie's uses Aunty Ifeoma to illustrate the positive values in the new woman -educated, accommodating, humane, articulate, resourceful and determined. She vehemently withstands her brother's and Ifediora's kindred's bullying. She defiantly refuses that their late father, a traditionalist till death, should be given a Christian burial. She honestly advises the sister-in-law to resist the brother's violence against the family. She breathes love and the desire for freedom into Jaja and Kambili's stone-cold hearts. And she raises the voice of opposition against the sole administrator's vengeful leadership in the university. She finally leaves the country for America when she loses her job and there is no other means to train her children.

## VII

### LANGUAGE AND STYLE IN THE *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Adichie's use of the naïve narrator, Kambili, to narrate the characters' struggle for freedom is appropriate. As she goes through the journey of life, there is a significant growth in her consciousness or her perception of people, events, situations and environment. The young girl, who in her naivety admires the father's piety and dogmatism, after her journey to Nsukka sees clearly that his fervour for his own brand of Catholicism destroys the family.

Adichie also uses a lot of symbols in the novel. She abundantly uses objects, characters and places to represent ideas in the character's quest for freedom. The 'missal', which their father flings at Jaja on Ash Wednesday for his abstinence from receiving Holy Communion represents the Catholic church's authority which the father uses to suffocate and destroy the family. The flinging of the missal at Jaja shows him up as an iconoclast because it is not supposed to be used as a weapon against Jaja. This results in an open revolt against the father's authority.

Besides, the figurines with its ballet dancers, which the missal broke represents their mother's dream for freedom. She polishes them every day for several minutes. By this act, her aspiration for freedom is renewed. The breaking of the figurines is a break in her marriage and the beginning of her decision to end her period of bondage. Kambili says:

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. (p.15)

Moreover, Father Amadi, who helps to tear down the walls of the prisons in Kambili and Jaja's minds, is also a symbolic character. He is used to show that the Catholic Church has some positive values. He sincerely does not believe that being a priest is tantamount to his losing his cultural identity. Adichie uses him to debunk early missionaries' idea that:

In serving colonialism, the church often took the role of arbiter of what was culturally correct. African ancestral beliefs were equated with the devil (who was black anyway), and it took a very long time before some European church accepted prevailing African beliefs as constituting religion rather than mere witchcraft and magic. (Rodney, 1986:278)

Furthermore, the purple hibiscus that Jaja took from Aunty Ifeoma's garden at Nsukka and planted in their own compound stands for the revolutionary spirit that will change the family and the entire society. Jaja is this rare breed of flower, which is planted in the compound. As it takes root and blossoms so also Jaja will grow up. And as the gardener 'raked underneath the frangipani trees, and dead leaves and pink flowers lay in piles, ready for the wheel barrow', (p. 108), and new orange trees, purple hibiscus and ixora replace them, so will Jaja develop and replace their father.

Adichie makes plentiful use of ironies in the work. Eugene Achike whom Father Benedict compared to Christ is an ironic statement. He is a Janus-faced monster that presents a saintly, human face to the public and that of a violent, vengeful and monstrous one to his family. He lacks the meekness and the accommodating spirit of Christ. It is ironically that it is his son who will fulfill that function of a saviour to his family. There is also irony in their mother's T-shirt with GOD IS LOVE because there is no love in their Christian family. There is no love in a man that batters his family and subjects them to fear.

She uses other figures of speech – simile and metaphor – which are suitable to her central theme of the struggle for freedom. Each time their father brutally beats their mother, Kambili compares her wild look with that of mad people. She says several times in her narration: 'Her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wondered around the roadside garbage dumps in town, pulling grim, torn canvas bags with their life fragments inside'. (p. 34) Her husband's incessant beating has traumatized her and in that state she decided to poison him. Even after the man's death, this mental state did not die with him for till the end of the narrative, Kambili still insists that:

Mama shakes her head, and her scarf starts to slip off. She reaches out to knot it again as loosely as before. Her wrapper is just as loose around her waist, and she ties and reties it often, giving her the air of the unkempt women in Ogbete Market, who let their wrappers unravel so that everyone sees the hole-riddled slips they have on underneath. She does not seem to mind that she looks this way; she doesn't even know. (pp. 295:296)

Besides, she employs effectively linguistic parallelism or pattern repetition in her prose narrative. Kambili emphasizes what happened after their mother came to Nsukka unscheduled:

She cried for a long time. She cried until my hand, clasped in hers, felt stiff. She cried until Auntie Ifeoma finished cooking the rotting meat in a spicy stew. She cried until she fell asleep, her head against the seat of the chair. (p. 249)

This technique serves two purposes: adding musical effect to the passage and underlining the extent of the woman's sorrow.

Adichie is comparable to Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* in her description of the African fauna and flora in *Purple Hibiscus*. The only difference is that while Conrad describes the untamed and untamable

vegetation and animals in Jungle Africa, Adichie's are the harmless ones. She describes them in a way that the reader feels that they are also characters in her novel.

She has recourse to words and situations that create lasting mental images on the reader. For example, she says that her mother's three pregnancies are aborted due to their father's violence on her, even during the time she is pregnant. The word 'abortion' creates a mental impression of loss of life, futility, grief and pain. She uses this abortion to show the effect of domestic violence on the family. Any family and any society where there is violence, nothing can grow healthily in it.

Finally, she employs the narrative techniques of flashback and foreshadowing to control the story. Kambili begins the story from 'Breaking Gods' on a Palm Sunday, which events normally would have appeared at the middle of the narration. And in this first part, she foreshadows Jaja's defiance and the break up of the family. The flashback is efficiently used in the greatest part of the work subtitled 'Speaking with Our Spirits'; the other two parts follow the normal sequence. This style, somehow, gives episodic plot to the novel, but it has the advantage of allowing the author to narrate events without appearing to be repetitive.

## CONCLUSION

The novelist has shown that freedom is a natural state of man, which even the lower animals try to enjoy. And that man should resist vehemently any abridgement of that natural gift to man whether it manifests in the form of domestic violence or dictatorial control of the apparatus of state or in the trampling on academic freedom. The price one pays for the tolerance of dictators is either death or physical and mental trauma and a state of hopelessness. Adichie encapsulates this allegorical struggle for freedom in a highly, symbolic and thought-provoking images that haunt the reader for a very long time after he must have put back the novel on the bookshelf.

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