

TRANSITION OF A RED HIBISCUS TO A PURPLE ONE

AN ANALYSIS OF CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS: A STRIVE FOR FREEDOM AND REVELATION THROUGH BITTERNESS, STRUGGLE AND REBELLION

SELVARANI PAULRAJ

Assistant Professor,
Department of Management / Commerce,
New Horizon College,
Marathahalli, Bangalore.
(KR) INDIA

Abstract: Purple Hibiscus, the first novel of Adiche is an engaging narration that takes us on a heart wrenching, nerve gripping, emotional journey. It touches upon the social, political and psychological influences that impact Kambili Achike, a 15 year old girl, the protagonist of the story. The analysis takes us through the lives of the protagonist and her family, consisting of parents and brother Jaja, whose lives are tossed in the sea of religious conflict, social obligation and the eccentricities of a Papa who is a complex man with multiple undertones of fanaticism and puritanism. This man subjects them to extreme physical and mental abuse borne by the rest in passive silence. All this begins to change with the coming of aunt Ifeoma, the father's sister who is a spitting contradiction of the father. The paper is an attempt to unravel the story from the perspective of the chief protagonist Kambili.

Key words: Religious complexity, revelation, self-awareness, silence and suppressed emotions

Introduction:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist and feminist campaigner was born in 1977 to a middle-class Igbo family in Enugu, Nigeria. Born to educated parents as the fifth of six children, she lived what she describes as a 'very happy childhood, full of laughter and love, in a very close-knit family. 'Pressured by social and familial expectations, she was goaded to take admission in a Medical school. After a year and a half, she dropped out of this and decided to pursue her ambitions as a writer, pursuing a communication scholarship in the US. From day one, she became alert to racial generalisations, having to address the 'story of catastrophe' in all her writings. "Leaving Nigeria made me much more aware of being Nigerian and what that meant. It also made me aware of race as a concept, because I didn't think of myself as black until I left Nigeria" This awakening is resplendent in every one of her writings.

The Novel: An Analysis

The opening of the novel "Things started to fall apart at home..." alerts the reader to sit up and take note of the seriousness with which the writer embarks on this journey, an unfurling of the most touching revelation. When Papa throws his missal at Jaja for not taking communion, breaking mama's precious collection of figurines, there is a stoic silence and unsaid emotions which grips the reader into a state of personal grief and suffering. A prominent man in the Achike's village of Enugu, Eugene Achike runs several successful factories, and the owner of the Standard newspaper, infamous for its criticism of Nigeria's corrupt government, is a convert Christian who believes those that follow Igbo traditions and worship as heathens. Expecting his wife and children to blindly follow his instructions and physically assaulting them when not obeyed brings out the fanatic in the man who later embraces and apologises for his barbaric act. When the mother is pregnant, yet again he loses his cool and beats her black and blue, and then rushes her to the hospital carrying her on his shoulders. The children alarmed, stare after the father and notice, "There's blood on the floor," (pg33). In spite of being a devout Catholic who enjoys a great repute in his community and state, he is ruthless to his kith and kin and estranged from his own father's traditional African culture. The impact of this suffering and suffocation affects Kambili greatly. She stutters to begin a conversation and is haunted by the ghosts of her fears and uncertainties. While trying to study, "The black type letter blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood. The blood was watery, flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes." (35) The pressure to be an epitome of perfection takes its toll on her, that she feels, 'like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady with my hand'

The atrocious violence is treated with a frighteningly casual attitude. (Okuyade) explains this in his essay, "When Kambili narrates the issues of spouse beating, she does so with a sense of ordinariness and opacity that one can hardly describe Eugene's home as a domestic war zone. From her narrative it seems as if spouse beating is a normal phenomenon" (Okuyade, 249)

The novel traverses the terrain of Abba, the native village of Papa, who although has disowned his father because he refused to subject himself to the compulsion of conversion by the missionaries, visits his palatial home every Christmas to show his generosity to his people.

He is hailed as Omelora, who feeds the entire village for five days and distributes Naira like they were pebbles to be strewn. It is here that the children, Kambili and Jaja get to meet their aunt Ifeoma and her children, who too visit their hometown, whenever they can afford the expenses of a travel. The stark difference in the social and economic status of the two families is highlighted through this introduction. Having lost her husband Ifeora in an accident, she is struggling to bring up her three children and take care of her father's emotional and material needs. The forthright outspoken and fearless children of Ifeoma who seem to have taken after her, come as a striking contrast to the coy subdued and inhibited Kambili who is considered 'a backyard snob' and proud by her fellow mates at school and even Amaka, the elder of the cousins.

The twist in the novel happens when aunt Ifeoma gets permission to take them sightseeing, but actually drives them to the Aro festival to look at the mmuo. Kambili gets jittery when aunt Ifeoma stops enroute to pick up her grandfather Papa Nnukwu to accompany them to the festival. She is convinced by Papa to believe he is a pagan and so a sinner. Aunty is saddened at this perspective thrust on them and pauses to clarify that he is a traditionalist and not a pagan. But to this vulnerable young mind, whatever has been fed as right by her father stands to hold good. She remembers how they pray every day for such people's conversion so that they do not end in the everlasting torment of hellfire. When they returned from visiting grandpa, they were accused of spending more time in the company of a heathen, and asked "did you desecrate your Christian tongue". (pg 69) In contrast, her maternal grandfather was revered by Papa, who spoke highly of his missionary service and had his photo hung in their home wall.

When Kambili watches her cousins bond so naturally with their Papa-Nnukwu, there is a certain longing in her and she experiences tormenting conflict between what she has been fed as the truth by her father and what she hears as the truth from aunt Ifeoma. As she watches the mmuo in Eze Icheke, which Papa had described as participating in pagan masquerades, that are a part of 'devilish folklore' she realises how different her world of religious upbringing is as compared to her cousins, who had the fortune of listening to native tales and beliefs.

In (Hewett)'s article Finding her voice, she expresses that Kambili has become so paralyzed by fear that she struggles to even speak about the most mundane of things. Hewett says, "These secrets weigh most heavily on Kambili herself, whose frequent inability to speak suggests how deeply her fear has sunk" (Hewett, 9). When visiting her Aunty in Nsukka, Kambili often finds herself stuttering out muffled replies to anyone who dares ask her a question. When Father Amadi makes a comment to Kambili about not having seen her smile even once during the whole day, she looks away and does not reply. She thinks, "I looked down at my corn. I wanted to say I was sorry that I did not smile or laugh, but my words would not come" (pg 139). Aunty Ifeoma steps in to save her by replying, "She is shy". Kambili experiences her first figment of liberation when she is dropped off home by her aunt and that night she dreams of laughing heartily, like her aunt and cousins, a laughter that was 'cackling, throaty and enthusiastic'.

Kambili's curiosity to listen to the conversation between her mother and aunt further heightens her awe and admiration for the strong woman her aunt is, who had declined any monetary support from Papa in exchange for her belief and faith, 'But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things' (pg 95). She even has the guts to question Papa's behaviour, about doing 'God's job', 'If god will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene'. (pg 96)

A brave new world opens up for the children, especially Kambili, when they are dropped off at Nsukka by Kevin, the driver who is a Papa loyalist. They are given their schedule by Papa, which is expected to be adhered to just like they do it while at home. Nsukka is a different world. The University holds the motto, 'To restore the dignity of man', but due to political unrest, it is beset by fuel shortages, pay stoppages, strikes at medical clinics, blackouts, and rising food prices. The widowed Aunty Ifeoma successfully raises her three children, with what little she has. But her family is a happy one. Unlike Papa, Aunty Ifeoma encourages her children to question authority, raising them with faith but also intellectual curiosity. Watching the simple, uninhibited, exploratory life style of her aunt and cousins makes Kambili a little uncomfortable and awkward while Jaja seems to gel well and get along instantly with Obiora, and Chima, aunt's two sons. Jaja is fascinated by the garden and exclusive flora maintained by his aunt, in particular the Purple Hibiscus that seems rare and revolutionary, which would stand to symbolise the spirits of these children who grow to evolve into self-made individuals from the robotic, fear stricken, terrorised ones. Jaja means a defiant king in Igbo. while talking about defiance, aunt says, 'Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes, 'defiance is like marijuana-it is not a bad thing when it is used right' (pg 144) inculcating an attitude of assessing situations and acting accordingly. The entire stay at Nsukka with its diverse revelations and emotional transformations, comes out as the greatest learning of life lessons for the two children. They evolve to become independently acting, thinking individuals who acquire the skill to respond appropriately to situations whether it is joy, sorrow or anger.

Papa Nnukwu falls ill and is brought to Nsukka to be examined and treated at the university hospital. There is a greater bonding and connect that comes through this time, with Amaka taking special care of her grandpa and painting a portrait of him while he was seated with the morning sun falling on him. Kambili discovers the singer, dancer, athlete and the player she is, all unknown thus far because of her preoccupation with academics, driven to score the first rank, the only way to please Papa and avoid taunt and punishment. Father Amadi helps Kambili discover herself, her innate longings, aspirations and desires, that she is astounded to realise, she can experience normal emotions like any other teenager. He teaches her the art of questioning, and how important it is to question your doubts and not to accept everything lying low. Kambili says, 'I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I have ever heard myself laugh'. (pg179)

The call from Papa at an odd hour in the afternoon was in itself an alarm for Kambili and when it was to reprimand Aunt Ifeoma for keeping his children in the same house as her pagan father, it churned her stomach in fear of unprecedented consequences. 'He went on and on about a heathen being in the same house as his children'. (pg 181) He threatened to come the following day to take them but in the meantime grandpa passes away in his sleep. Papa gives generously for the traditional funereal but refuses to partake in it unless it is done in the Christian way. After the children are taken home, they are ruthlessly punished for hiding the truth about grandpa living along with them. He pours boiling hot water on their feet as a repentance for their deadly sin and while they twitch in agony and burn he weeps along, 'Kambili, you are precious, you should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it'. (pg 194) But suddenly, no punishment seemed harsh enough to break the ties with the paternal connect and in secrecy the children bring out their hidden memories of Nsukka, Kambili showing the painting of grandpa that had been given to her by Amaka while Jaja takes her to the refrigerator to show sticks of the Purple Hibiscus he had got along to plant in his compound. The bringing of the Purple Hibiscus is symbolic at multiple levels. Primarily to express a sense of rebellion that reflects liberation and a strive to end strife and agony. Doing what seems right in their conscience is what matters and hence Papa's threats no more hold good.

The children bond more openly and when Papa walks into her room while the two siblings are admiring their grandpa's painting, they know what would the consequences be. Kambili says, 'Perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka-even Papa-and things were destined not to be the same, to not be in their original order'. (pg 209) Papa is infuriated to see his children relate to the family members in an affectionate way unlike him, and as an act of a savage fury, he tears up the painting, making Kambili feel as if, 'Papa Nnukwu's body was being cut into pieces that small and stored in a fridge'. (pg 210) Desperate to protect the shredded pieces of the painting, that is precious and of great worth, Kambili lies on the floor covering her hands around the painting and getting kicked brutally and ruthlessly by her Papa. When she opens her eyes, she realises that she is hospitalised after the brutal onslaught on her.

The excruciating physical and mental suffering is resplendent on Mama's face when she is seated beside her daughter who is subjected to a trail of injections and medicines. 'Mama reached out to hold my hand. Her face was puffy from crying, and her lips were cracked, with bits of discoloured skin peeling off'. (pg 213) After being discharged from the hospital, she is taken to Nsukka, where she is left to recuperate and this period of recuperation comes as a period of reassessment for her, understanding the many missing pieces of the puzzle and a sense of resolve and determination to be the Purple Hibiscus the unique one rather than the submissive withdrawn self-suffering Red Hibiscus in her compound at Enugu. Her sense of amazement and wonder at aunt Ifeoma's parenting skills is explicit when she draws a parallel between Father Amadi's ways of grooming the boys in the field and her aunt's ways of motivating and encouraging her off springs, 'it was what aunt Ifeoma did to my cousins, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. But it was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, but because we were terrified that we couldn't'. (pg 226)

Learning to become comfortable with her body and mind, learning to identify her various emotions of excitement, infatuation and uncertainty, she feels a great warmth and attachment towards Father Amadi, which she mistakes for love and picks up the courage to express to him, something unheard of in her earlier phase of fear stricken perfect life. After getting her hair plaited by a local hair dresser, Father compliments her looks and suggests that she try her hand in acting. Surprised, she says, 'I can't act, I have never acted'. (pg 239) she is overwhelmed when the father casually boosts her morale by saying, 'you can try, you can do anything you want Kambili' (pg 239) Such spontaneity and simplicity was something alien to her knowledge and she seemed to like this better.

The finale to the family drama comes to a close with Mama rushing to Nsukka in a, 'yellow unsteady-looking taxi' (pg 247) weeping, confessing that she could not take the physical abuse any longer. She had conceived again but she did not disclose this to any of them as she was six weeks into her pregnancy. Papa, in yet another fit of outrage had thrown a wooden table at her, hitting her stomach and killing the foetus instantly. "you know that small table where we keep the family bible nne? Your father broke it on my belly. My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it" (pg 248) Papa comes to take them back home and meekly the three of them follow him into the car but this seems the last of the meek acts of submission because the story comes a full circle with Palm Sunday series of rebellion where Jaja refuses communion, Mama no more whispers and also without a fear takes food in an open tray to Jaja's room and finally Jaja insists on going to Nsukka for Easter and Papa does not have a choice but to relent. It suddenly seemed like Papa was losing his grip over their lives, and they were emerging out of the cocoon asserting themselves without fear or inhibition.

The cousins get along like a house on fire enjoying their last few days together before aunt gets her tickets sorted to go to the US and Jaja and Kambili may end up in boarding as suggested by aunt Ifeoma and Father Amadi. After father leaves to Germany on his new assignment, the rest go on a drive, stop by in a hilly place for a short picnic and get home excited and exhausted. While at the picnic aunt is surprised at Kambili's sprinting speed, she suggests training to become a sprinter. "I will find you a trainer, eh, there is big money in athletics". "I laughed. It seemed so easy now, laughter. So many things seemed easy now. Jaja was laughing, too, as was Amaka and we were all sitting on the grass waiting for Obiora to come up to the top" (pg 284-285) As a disruption to this peace and quiet, the phone rings bringing in bad news. Mama was on the line very solemnly, like a recorder, repeating, 'It's your father. They called from the factory, they found him lying dead on the desk' (pg 286) Kambili never thought her father could ever die, that he seemed immortal.

At home, back in Enugu, Mama had restricted any one from coming home to enquire after Papa's death as she wanted them as a family to mourn privately. The autopsy report revealed that there was poison in his blood. Mama in a calm tone confesses that with the help of Sisi the house maid who knew a witch doctor, they had begun poisoning his tea, just after she had suffered her second abortion with the table flung on her belly. Kambili is shocked and disturbed while Jaja suffers pangs of guilt for not protecting Mama like Obiora did. To save Mama from any humiliation and insult, Jaja takes the blame that he had poisoned his Papa, after which he is led away by the police.

Jaja has been in prison for thirty one months (close to three long years) while so much has happened outside politically and socially. At the home front Mama remains silent, staring at the walls and hardly ever speaks. Finally when the lawyers give hope that Jaja would be released soon, there is some light in the eyes of Mama and Kambili. The cousins and aunt keep in touch, further strengthening their bond and finally Mama says, 'Thank you nne' (pg 306). There is a new found joy and a purpose in the future as Kambili chats with her mother about visiting Nsukka, visiting America and planting Orange trees and Purple Hibiscus in Abba.

Having focused on Kambili's perspective alone, there are other twists in the story (which require another paper by itself), which manoeuvres around the political unrest, the death of Ade Coker, the editor of The Standard, the threats that come in succession to Papa for his forthright liberal views on the Government and Mama's ability to camouflage her deep-set pain and suffering with her silence and pseudo normal expressions, which add further intensity and strength to the story.

References

Primary Source: Purple Hibiscus-Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche

Secondary Source:

Hewett, H. (n.d.). Finding her voice.

Okuyade, O. (n.d.). *Changing Borders and changing voices*.

Violence and Silence in the Home-The Stockton Postcolonial Studies.

Nigerian Novel explores Religion and Silence-all Africa.com.

Biography-Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche-Writer, Feminist-By Miranda Bain