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# Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and issues of ideology in the constitution of the Nigerian novel

## Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and issues of ideology in the constitution of the Nigerian novel

The interplay of the subject and concept of ideological interpellation in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is exemplary of how the Nigerian novel represents the changing experience of nationhood in Nigeria. Adichie's novel adopts the element of voice as a veritable strategy for the constitution of this interplay of subjects and interpellation. Accordingly, the novel negotiates the tension between the two aspects of voice, that of who sees and that of who narrates. Through the homodiegetic character, Kambili, whose name means "That I too may live", Adichie presents a dialectical situation between characters understood as subjects, with the eventual emergence of Kambili to self-knowledge and condition of social responsibility. The aim of this is to examine how Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is typical of how the Nigerian novel engages itself in issues of ideology and how these issues, in turn, crystallize the challenges of nation-ness in Nigeria. We begin by recalling Walter Benjamin's timely assertion that the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of living. The significance of Benjamin's assertion for the Nigerian novel is the sense of anxious conjuncture that disavows the fixity and current of certainty in the oral tale. The implication of this for the Nigerian novel is its formal dynamism that enables it to illuminate the changing challenges of nationhood. **Key words:** characterisation; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; ideology; Nigerian fiction.

### Introduction

With her two novels to date, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has distinguished herself as one of Nigeria's more prominent new generation female writers. This status was confirmed with her emergence in 2007 as winner of the prestigious Orange Prize for fiction for her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Her novels, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) are animated by attempts to engage traditional constructs of the woman. In this regard, she shows that for women to rise above these traditional constructs, especially as 'good women,' they need to understand themselves and, having done this they equally need to express their peculiar experiences. Accordingly, self-knowledge and self-expression become *sine qua non* for action. In this essay, therefore, we will examine how her first novel becomes a paradigm for demystifying forms of patriarchal violence. Our guiding thread is that self-knowledge and self-expression form the basis for demystifying patriarchal authority and violence in Adichie's work. Within the broad attempt to constitute the novel in Nigeria we will

examine how Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* adopts the issues of ideology especially that of the subject and interpellation in order to achieve self-knowledge and self-expression.

In the "Storyteller" Walter Benjamin (1969: 87) makes an assertion that succinctly describes the relationship between the novel and the nation in Nigeria; he says: "the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of living." Two phrases in Benjamin's assertion call for attention. They are: "gives evidence" and "profound perplexity." The verbal phrase "gives evidence" implies that the novel represents not just in the sense of the German *vertreten*, meaning speaking for, but in the sense of *darstellen*, that is recreation or retelling what is there in a new light. This is corroborated by the word "record." The word, "perplexity," as used by Benjamin implies bewilderment, confounding, confusion, bafflement, puzzlement and mystification.

Benjamin's assertion comes after an earlier distinction between the novel form and the other forms before it such as the folktale, the legend and even the novella. According to him, the novel neither comes "from oral tradition nor goes into it." He argues further that "to write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life" (Benjamin 1969: 87). Implicit in Benjamin's perception of the novel is a sense of anxious conjuncture that disavows the fixity and current of certainty that pervades the oral tale. The certainty in the tale exists because "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (Benjamin 1969: 87). In other words, the storyteller and his community of listeners enter into a union sutured by their shared experience. Here (the storyteller) is at home with his audience and they in turn participate in the story because they readily recognize themselves in it. This sense of community and even participation melts away in the novel. This is because life itself is unpredictable. And as Harry Levin (1986: 11) has affirmed, "life is protean and cannot be held in a capsule." This sense of bewilderment, of bafflement, and mystification that drives the novel as a genre becomes even more pertinent in the Nigerian novel.

Earlier accounts of the Nigerian novel have either perceived it as a response to a general sense of history (King 1980) or an assimilation of tradition (Nnolim 2007). The more scrupulous record of the relationship between the Nigerian novel and a history of nationalism in the former colonised states is found in Bruce King's *The New English Literatures: Cultural Nationalism in a Changing World* (1980). The relevance of King's work lies in its acute sense of history which allows it to focus not only on specific national boundaries as such but on the nations that make up the British Commonwealth. In terms of history, therefore, he locates the Second World War as the main stimulant to a new consciousness that was soon conveyed through the new literatures. Thus: "its general effect was to set the stage for the dissolution of the Empire" (King 1980: 22). The obvious consequence of this across board was the emergence of a literary expression animated by "explorations of colonial structure

and inheritance of local society” (King 1980: 25). It is perhaps in his account in the third chapter of his book entitled, “New literatures and nationalisms,” that King illuminates the direct relationship between literary communication and the process of nationalism in the new states.

He begins by noting the effect of fracturing from colonialism, to the emergence of the new nations and the new literatures. He draws an analogy with Europe and notes that the national literatures (what he also calls vernacular literatures) of Europe would not have been conceivable at a time when Europe was “culturally unified through Rome” (King 1980: 39). Accordingly, he says, the same process of nation-building in Europe can be said to be at work in the new nation states. This is because these nations are “attempting to transform themselves into nations having shared history, myths, habits and values of a people with a common culture” (King 1980: 39). However the bonding to fracture that manifested in these nations had different implications for the people and provided a diversity of subjects for the literature. For example, Canada and Australia may have had shared experiences emanating from their immigrant populations; but for countries like Nigeria or Ghana, national bonding posed a different set of challenges especially in the face of diverse indigenous ethnic nationalities.

Apart from a sense of fracture and bonding, King also identifies the significance of education to the rise of the new literatures in English. According to him the writer in the new nation state is: “likely to belong to the rising new class which having obtained education or urban careers is in the vanguard of the nationalist movement” (King 1980: 45). In *The Novel and Change in Africa* (2006) we have used the Nigerian example in order to highlight the impact of formal Western education on the emergence and development of the African novel. As we have shown, formal Western education brought about the promotion of literacy leading not only to the manifestation of a creative spirit embodied in the writers, but also to the availability of a reading public (Udumukwu 2006: 11). As King has stressed also, formal Western education brought the writer in the new nation to imbibe the formalism in the Western literary canon. But it is important to underscore that when we point to the effect of education on the new literatures in English, education should not *ipso facto* be restricted to formal Western education especially that kind of education delivered through formal instruction in schools and standardised curricula. What gives the new literature its peculiar timbre is the fact that the writers of this literature are children of a double consciousness. They may have received formal training in schools and universities but their works reflect that they are also products of indigenous traditions and modes of instruction. We must also bear this in mind in any attempt to describe an aesthetic for this literature. Accordingly, the writers’ awareness of their traditional orature forms an integral aspect of their education. The difference we witness in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* does not manifest only due to his formal instruction in the tradition

of the English novel. It comes also from the fact of his knowledge of Igbo orature. It is on the basis of the effect of these two diverse traditions that we can apprehend the writer's sense of his social responsibility.

Charles Nnolim's "The Nigerian tradition in the novel" begins with an explanation of tradition as the literary conventions and habits of expression used by the Nigerian writer especially the novelist in order to highlight a perception of the Nigerian worldview. Of significance as Nnolim has noted is the writer's ability to assimilate materials from a diversity of cultural backgrounds especially one that is Western in orientation (the novel form in particular) and the other originating from traditional Nigerian orature. Nnolim's essay also forms an important intervention on the possible translation of a major literary form such as the novel from its Western European roots to new cultural contexts. Nnolim is alert to the contribution of oral traditions in shaping the form and content of the Nigerian novel.

Beyond the historicism of King and the cultural nationalist fervour of Nnolim, it is important to see the Nigerian novel as a representation, a narrative, a telling of the power of social and ideological structures which impinge upon the realisation of such ideal knowledge as the Nigerian nation. In spite of its half-century experience as an independent nation state from British colonial rule, Nigeria is a nation in the process of becoming. What the novel has done is to record this process of evolution through, to recall Foucault's assertion, "multiple constraints." These "constraints" are rooted in the very identity of Nigeria itself as a postcolonial nation-state.

Officially, it was in 1914 that the colonial Governor Lord Lugard effected the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern Protectorates. But the process of nation formation in Nigeria dates back to 1826 with the influx of British merchant ships in the Bonny River. As James Coleman has recorded, the Berlin Conference of 1885 gave the British the mandate to acquire the Niger Delta area. This was followed by the renaming of the region as the Oil Rivers Protectorate with a charter given to the Royal Niger Company "to administer, make treaties, levy customs and trade in all territories in the basin of the Niger and its affluents (sic)." (Coleman 1979: 41). What followed was a gradual and piecemeal acquisition of territories, protectorates and colony that was eventually called Nigeria after a bill on the Royal Niger Company in the House of Commons in July, 1899. The colonial project from its outset in the late 1800s manifested on the basis of agglutinations – the appropriation of diverse and disparate lands and people under the mandate of the British Crown. In the postcolonial era the nation has undergone different forms of reconfigurations, which shift away from an abstract form of cohesion through the process of regionalization, state creation in order to justify the idea of One Nigeria. But to recall the case made by Ania Loomba (1998: 207) about the postcolonial nation: "The nation is a ground of dispute and debate, a site for the competing imaginings of different ideological and political interests." It is in this kind of troubled milieu that we can appreciate the restless

survival of the novel in its march to provide “evidence of the profound perplexity” of living in Nigeria.

What emerges in this conception of the nation is the problematic nature of truth itself. Truth is not a transcendental given to be decoded on the basis of a universal history of nationalism as in Bruce King or an original sense of source or culture as in Nnolim. On the contrary, truth manifests as something that the people of the nation work to produce for themselves. Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) is exemplary of how the people of the Nigerian nation go about producing their own truth; how they use it and demand that it serve their fundamental needs rather than their needs conforming to a fixed pattern of truth. This worldliness of truth is highlighted in *Arrow of God* not only through the cast of characters that confidently and purposefully do not accept things on their face value. It is there in the construction of the deity, Ulu, the establishment of the office of Ezeulu, the functions Ulu is supposed to perform and the crisis that erupts towards the end when Ezeulu tends to ossify truth rather than making it malleable to the needs of the people.

Also in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) we are presented with an incident in which a minor character, Elewa's uncle, asserts thus: “We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make plans for themselves and their families.” He emphasizes in addition: “I say there is too much fighting in Kangan, too much killing. But fighting will not begin unless there is first a thrusting of fingers into eyes. Anybody who wants to outlaw fights must first outlaw the provocation of fingers thrust into eyes.” (Achebe 1987: 228).

Implicit in this assertion and emphasis are two domains of discourse. These are the domains of those that make plans and that of those for whom plans are made. What is foregrounded, however, is the sheer irresponsibility of those with authority. Achebe presents this as the mark of the failure of leadership in the nation. And this failure projects the nation into a violent milieu as we see in the emphasis by the character. Note the choice of words that represents this milieu. It includes: fighting, killing, thrusting of fingers into eyes, and provocation. Achebe is being figurative in his presentation of this milieu. But it only confirms the case made earlier by Loomba about the “nation as a ground of dispute and debate.” The implication of this is that the language of national belonging “comes laden with atavistic apologues” (Bhabha 1994: 203). Rather than existing on the basis of a fixed sense of self-apprehension, the nation emerges as a “contested referent” (Esonwanne 1993) or as a “contested construct” (Yewah 2001).

A functional way of negotiating these concerns in the Nigerian novel is to adopt the crucial issues embedded in the theory of ideology especially the issues of interpellation and the concept of the subject in ideology. Generally ideology is defined as a systematic body of ideas organized from a particular point of view, which can be political, scientific or racist in nature. As such it manifests through language as a

systematic distortion or false consciousness that is used in the interest of a social group or class. But to go beyond this general conception we need to recall Terry Eagleton's assertion that "ideology is a convenient way of categorizing under a single heading a whole lot of different things we do with signs" (1991: 193).

This definition of ideology owes a debt to Louis Althusser's structuralist revision of Marxism. In this regard Althusser had defined ideology as a representation of the relationship between individuals who function as subjects. Thus ideology establishes a link between a subject, who is a free subjectivity, a centre of initiative and power, and another subject who is the subjected being that submits to a higher authority: "the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects" (Althusser 1971: 171). Our subjection in ideology is achieved through the operation of interpellation or hailing. Accordingly, "ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects" (Althusser 1971: 175). This poses a genuine problem in the context of the Nigerian novel. This problem emanates from the implicit paradox in the constitution of the subject. This is because as concrete individuals, subjects can engage themselves in ideological recognition; they can wield a particular ideology to their advantage. The absence of a homogenous sense of truth, to which all subscribe even within a national boundary such as Nigeria, is testimony to the different things people are doing with signs as subjects in ideology. The obvious advantages are the demystification of the nation as a unitary essence and the understanding of the nation beyond the limit set by the power-elite. In the rest of the discussion we will see how *Purple Hibiscus* represents the role of ideology in the constitution of the Nigerian novel.

### **The action of *Purple Hibiscus***

The action of *Purple Hibiscus* is organised in four sections: Section 1 is entitled, "Breaking God": Palm Sunday "(1–16).<sup>1</sup> Section 2 is entitled "Speaking with our spirits: Before Palm Sunday (17–253). Section 3 is captioned "The pieces of God: After Palm Sunday "(255–91), while the final section which forms the denouement is captioned "A different Silence: The Present" (293–307). The homodiegetic character, Kambili, a teenage girl, tells the story. She belongs to a family of four, made up of her father, Papa, mother, Mama, brother, Jaja, and herself. As the story unfolds, her experiences in the family are interwoven with the experiences of members of the extended family especially that of her aunt, Auntie Ifeoma and her children. While Kambili's family resides in Enugu, Auntie Ifeoma resides at Nsukka. The action moves between these two main settings of Enugu and Nsukka in South Eastern Nigeria, in the dying months of the military rule of Sani Abacha. Even though her narrative centres on events in her family, which makes it possible to assert that the action is

propelled by the ideology of the domestic sphere. These events form intersection with the general milieu of military dictatorship in the nation. Kambili's father's authoritarian dominance in the domestic sphere becomes a shadow of the dictatorial regime of the military at the national level.

The main line of action is initiated by Jaja's refusal to go for communion. It develops with Papa's reaction that results in the breaking of Mama's figurines. The action and reaction unleash a cloud of silence and anxiety that is heightened by Papa's fussiness, which is borne out of a fanatic Catholicism. As Kambili tells us, "when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything" (15).

The action moves to the past in section two which is entitled, "Speaking with our spirits: Before Palm Sunday." In this section we are given insight to the shadow of Eugene's authority over the family. The events in this section are foreshadowed toward the end of the last as Kambili. "Lay in bed and let her mind rake through the past through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips." (15–16). With this in mind it is easy to see that Jaja's defiance which manifested as his refusal to go to the communion, is precipitated by the events of those years of silence of muted interaction as they spoke with "our spirits". The second manifestation of this defiance is subtly reported by Mama in response to Kambili's question as to Jaja's whereabouts; to this Mama responds: "In his room he did not come down for dinner." (15).

The incident of Eugene beating his wife and daughter early on a Sunday morning is a dramatisation of the atmosphere that compels muted interactions in the home (101–02). It also initiates the atmosphere of domestic violence. Nsukka lifts the lid off their contained life. At Nsukka Jaja and Kambili come face-to-face with reality as it is. Nsukka takes them away from their natural attitude and exposes them to the harsh realities of social experience. It begins with the realities in Auntie Ifeoma's apartment. We witness it in her cramped accommodation. It also manifests in the struggle to save water either by leaving the toilet unflushed (121) or by rising early to fetch water from the tap (126). Also, Auntie Ifeoma "dissolves a few spoonfuls of dried milk in a jug of cold water." (127). Another dimension of these harsh realities is the incessant fuel scarcity of the nation. From Auntie Ifeoma's apartment and the domestic sphere, we move to the national level. The good part of Nsukka for Kambili and Jaja is to live without Papa's schedule (140).

### **Voice in *Purple Hibiscus***

Voice is the first and perhaps the more pervasive aspect of *Purple Hibiscus* that serves as a vehicle for the constitution of the Nigerian novel. We will then begin with the question, what is voice? In accord with contemporary theories of narrative, especially influenced

by the work of Gerard Genette, voice is used strictly in terms of how we can provide answers to two key questions. The first question is: "who speaks?" This is the question of the identity of the text's narrator, its narrative or diegetic voice. Diegetic from diegesis is used here in order to identify the distinguishing feature of narrative as different from say drama. In this regard narrative is marked by the act of telling as opposed to the predominant mimetic nature of drama. The second question is: "who sees?" This refers to the question of whose point of view orients the diegesis of the narrative text.

The significance of *Purple Hibiscus*, which opens it up to the issues of ideology, is that it is animated by a tension between these two aspects of voice. Although Kambili acquires the identity of the narrative voice, the one who speaks, the narrative itself is driven by three different points of view. Kambili qualifies as what Genette calls a homodiegetic voice. This is to say, she is both the narrator and also a main character in the narrative. She participates in the actions she presents to the reader. At the same time, she captures the different points of view implicit in the action she is presenting. By mediating between presentation and perspective, she acquires the advantage of empathy and distance. Empathy enables her to be involved in the action, while distance enables her to become cynical of, and therefore, reveal the ironical situation in what she sees.

As we have noted earlier, three different levels or perspectives drive the narrative. These terms, point of view and perspective are the same as the term, focalization (Prince, 1988). But for the purpose of consistency and clarity of presentation, we will use perspective in our discussion. Three characters represent three perspectives in *Purple Hibiscus*, namely: Eugene (Papa), Auntie Ifeoma, and Kambili who is also the speaking voice. Interestingly, these three perspectives form a dialectical pattern of development in the narrative.

### **Eugene's perspective**

Accordingly, Eugene's perspective is the thesis, which is also the dominant patriarchal position. Auntie Ifeoma constitutes the antithesis. Her perspective is not only contrary to the other, but it serves to initiate moments of its demystification. Kambili's perspective functions as the synthesis. This is because through her perspective a new voice and basis for action is defined especially towards the end of the narrative. But the second perspective, that is Auntie Ifeoma's perspective, forms the catalyst to this new perspective in the novel.

In terms of practical analysis, therefore, these three levels of perspective will guide our discussion. It is important to note, as well, that although the plot is arranged in three parts, the three perspectives we have identified are interwoven into the entire action. But the importance of these tripartite levels of perception is that it creates room for multiple ideological subjects to be seen. On the basis of this potential of



clearing a space within which we hear different voices, *Purple Hibiscus* is an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin has called a dialogic and polyphonic text. Such a text is ultimately oriented by dialogism, that is, “the effect created when a text contains a diversity of [...] narratorial and characterial voices creating significant contrasts and tensions.” (Jahn 2005: 19). The overall significance of polyphony is that it strengthens our conception of ideology as constituted by relations between subjects. It is on the basis of polyphony, also, that the novel as an example of postcolonial discourse can serve to demystify the nation as a unitary essence.

Eugene is presented as a zealous even fanatical Catholic and entrepreneur. Our first encounter with him is on the very first page of the novel, at a moment of crisis as he reacts to his son’s refusal to go to communion. We are told: “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère. We had just returned from church.” (3).<sup>1</sup>

Language functions here in order to capture the overall crisis at this stage. Thus we are told: “Papa flung his heavy missal across the room,” and it “broke the figurines on the étagère.” With this “everything changed” as “he banged his leather bound missal down on the table.” The dominant image here is that of fracture with its connotations including: crash, rupture, fissure, shatter and smash. On the surface, Jaja’s defiance precipitates the shattering of Mama’s figurines. We are told that Mama is emotionally attached to the figurines. In addition, the title of this section of the novel, “Breaking Gods,” refers to the shattering of these figurines. But beyond the surface we witness a pattern. This is because Jaja’s defiance serves to put his father’s dominance in brackets. The young man’s action establishes a shattering of the oppressive cloud cast over the entire domestic space as a result of their father’s presence and dominance. In this regard their father is the god in question. Although he breaks his wife’s figurines, “the figurine pieces on the floor” ironically point to the demystification of his authority. This is because as we will see, this incident provides the opportunity for the story to be told and also for Kambili to gain the capacity for self-expression.

Apart from this, the speaking voice here is Kambili’s. The echo of her voice resounds through the use of forms of the first person pronoun, namely: “my” and “we”. The possessive form “my” helps to establish a link between her and her brother, Jaja. But as a form of the first person, it also allows us to hear her as a subject in her own right and also as a female who has a brother. This is Adichie’s way of underscoring that one can be female and also a subject. Subjectivity, in other words, does not exist only for the advantage of the male. Again the voice we hear is not that of the brother, but hers. The plural form, “we,” is used to establish her participation in the action she is speaking about. The other participants are members of her family, her father (Eugene), her mother (Mama) and her brother (Jaja). The immediate setting for this first action is the

family's living room. The objects include: Papa's "heavy missal," Mama's "figurines on the étagère," and the "fresh palm fronds." The two other sentences that follow buttress Kambili's status not only as a speaker, but also as a participant and subject in the action. In this regard she speaks with foreknowledge in relation to the "fresh palm fronds." She says: "Later she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. They would stay there until next Ash Wednesday when we would take the fronds to church, to have them burned for ash." (3). The use of "we" and "our" points to her sense of participation.

Beyond what she says and a revelation of her involvement in it, another crucial point emerges even at this level of the narration. This is because it is not only what Kambili says that matters, it is also about what she sees. Through her telling we see a sense of home. But also, and more importantly, we see a sense of tradition. We see a tradition rooted in Catholicism. It is this tradition that interpellates the characters into the domain, "home". In addition, the third sentence that follows the previous two, introduces Papa as the dominant subject of tradition. We are told: "Papa, wearing a long gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year" (3). Accordingly, we hear Kambili speaking but through her, we see the dominant perspective that is presided over by Eugene as the dominant subject.

The action moves to an earlier period before Palm Sunday. The significant issue at this level is that it serves to illustrate forms of patriarchal control and subsequently violence. The major symptoms of patriarchal violence are bound up with the notions of "ownership," "domination," and "submission." In order to chart out the inter-relationship of these notions and their effects on patriarchal violence we will focus on the character, Eugene. As a character, Eugene has a peculiar self-image of himself. By self-image we mean the picture the individual has of himself or herself; or the sort of person an individual believes he or she is.

At the early stage of the narrative, Eugene's self-image is presented through the eyes of two other characters, namely: Kambili, his daughter and through the eyes of a minor character, Reverend Father Benedict, his parish priest. Kambili observes thus: "Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year. His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross...." (3). And she says: "Papa always sat in the front pew for Mass [...] Most people did not kneel to receive communion [...] but Papa did" (3). Apart from Kambili, Father Benedict says: "Look at Brother Eugene. He could have chosen to be like other Big Men in the country [...] But no, he used *The Standard* [a newspaper published by Eugene] to speak the truth..." (5).

We note the dominant mode of presentation of Eugene by both his daughter and the priest. The two voices have used the mode of contrast in their presentation of the character. First, the daughter contrasts him to the other worshippers in order to highlight his difference. Second, Father Benedict contrasts him from other "Big Men".

Thus we are told that Eugene believes in the truth and likes to affirm it unlike others and he is devoted in the exercise of his faith. He is also a lover of the truth.

Are these assessments by the two characters consistent with Eugene's own perception of his self-image? The answer is yes. This is demonstrated in his anger at Jaja's refusal to take communion. His ire in this instance is consistent with his sense of devotion. He says: "You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that." (6). He is even horrified to hear Jaja de-symbolizes the communion by calling it "wafer" instead of "host" as it is called in Roman Catholic liturgy. By insisting on the more sacred term, "host" rather than "wafer," Eugene remains consistent with his love for truth, that is, the truth of his faith.

Again the interplay between "host" and "wafer" is indicative not only of the opposition between denotation and connotation but also of the importance of signification for constituting postcolonial discourse. By insisting on the connotative import of the sign Eugene hopes to maintain tradition and thereby to keep discourse at the level of fixity. If he succeeds in doing this he will equally exercise his control, his power of ownership and domination not only on words but on his hearers. But by insisting on the primary or denotative significance of words Jaja calls attention to the fact that words function in accord with the user's intention. Therefore in the overall need for constructing postcolonial discourse we must come to terms with the facts that there is no internal core as such in words and we cannot be held in the prison-house of words.

Another instance of Eugene's stress on ownership, domination and submission unfolds at dinner especially on the occasion of sharing the new fruit juice from one of his factories. Jaja subtly reject Eugene's desire for confirmation of his ownership. This ownership manifests in his desire that members of his family accept the new product just as he has. We are told: "Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja [...] 'Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, *gbo*? Have you no words in your mouth?' [...] Have you nothing to say, *gbo*, Jaja." (13). At this Jaja responds: "*Mba*, there are no words in my mouth [...] I have nothing to say." Jaja thus refuses to engage in the act of repetition; that is of repeating the code of ownership, domination and submission instituted by his father.

Besides, we see Eugene's insistence on ownership and therefore patriarchal violence in the image of the compound wall at his family residence at Enugu. We are told: "The walls that surround Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School were very high, similar to our compound walls." (45). Apart from the high walls, the compound walls have "coiled electrified wires." The high walls, the coiled electrified wires and the large iron gates serve as indices to Eugene's sense of ownership. At the same time they represent the family compound as a garrisoned space with its correlation with barricade and iron curtain. Within this type of space, the lives of the children are run on the basis of rigid schedule. For example, "once" she says, Kevin

told Papa I took a few minutes longer, and Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on my face and ringing in my ears for days." (51). Earlier, Kambili tells us of an instance in which the effect of schedule is dramatised in the narrative. Thus she says: "Jaja and I washed our school uniforms while Sisi washed the rest of our clothes. We always soaked tiny sections of fabric in the foamy water first to check if the colours would run, although we knew they would not. We wanted to spend every minute of the half hour Papa allocated to uniform washing." (19).

At work here is domestic ideology within the framework of Eugene's household. On the surface it dramatizes an instance of Jaja and Kambili washing their school uniform. However, the ideological positioning emerges in the relationship between characters who are also subjects. Apart from Jaja and Kambili, the other characters here are Sisi and Papa. Papa is not physically present. But he is present ideologically because he is the dominant subject. By washing their uniform the children are dramatising an instance of their interpellation as subjects within the dominant ideology. Their action here is represented as also their response to their hailing by their absent father. Thus she says: "We wanted to spend every minute of the half hour Papa allocated to uniform washing." (?). Note also the implicit division of labour that forms an important part of the events in this scene. Sisi washed the rest of the clothes, while Jaja and Kambili focus on their uniform. The question will be asked: how does this seemingly insignificant event illustrate the issue of ideology?

Though the event may seem marginal, it illustrates the children's response to their father's schedule. They respond, first, as children who are conscious of their father's authority. Secondly, in that response, also, they signal an ironic situation that highlights the polyphony in the text. Thus in the second sentence in the passage quoted above, Kambili says at the moment of reflection, "although we knew they would not [run]." Their action in the first part of the sentence is in response to what Papa had said. Yet they are doing it even though they knew that the action is pointless. The point is that "although ..." signals their conception of themselves as subjects who can do without the schedule. And while the family visits the village at Christmas, Kambili notices a different atmosphere without schedules. Also, while they visit their cousins at Nsukka, he insists on maintaining control as he hands them their schedule.

On the surface, Eugene emerges as larger-than-life. Indeed this trait forms a basis for the critical reaction to *Purple Hibiscus*. Helen Chukwuma contends that in spite of Eugene's negative attributes, Adichie presents him as a monstrous representation of the modern African male. Chukwuma's worries are formed by the fact that Eugene seems to be a confirmation of the old colonialist assumption about Africa's backwardness. In spite of his success as an entrepreneur there is the possibility of perceiving Eugene as a chip of the "old tribal block" (Chukwuma 2006).

In responding to the opinion expressed by Chukwuma, we will recall two

important principles that are observed in characterisation. These are the principles of *harmotton* and *homoios*. The first principle implies that a character should be endowed with traits appropriately related to the action while the second principle underscores that the character should have idiosyncrasies and be like an individual (Prince 1988: 13). In terms of *harmotton*, Eugene indeed is overblown, but his presentation is consistent with the overall action of the novel especially the need to demystify the dominant subject of our postcolonial experience and to open up this space of the postcolonial nation to the many voices inhabiting it. He has authority but his actions and motivations render his authority questionable. In terms of *homoios*, Eugene does not at some moments behave like an individual. His relationship with his old father is typical of such negation in his character. This adds up to the overall effect of the action.

Jaja's action precipitates the demystification of patriarchal authority. But his action is directed not to himself as such. His action brings us to an important structuralist theme, namely: that change in an element affects change in other elements. In other words, Jaja's defiance creates a condition of disruption and change in the structure of the family. The disruption manifests in the shattering of Mama's figurines and Jaja's early departure from the dinner table to the consternation of Kambili. The result of this is Kambili and Jaja's visit to their relations at Nsukka. That visit in itself serves as a form of escape; it equally does not only open a new horizon in the development of Kambili as a character, but also serves to open up the next perspective represented by Auntie Ifeoma. Our discussion in this section has focused on Eugene's perspective. We will see how this perspective is negated in the next section.

### **Auntie Ifeoma's perspective**

Auntie Ifeoma is a sister to Eugene. She is widowed, lives with her three children at Nsukka where she works as a lecturer at the university. The death of her husband even before we meet her in the narrative is a feminist strategy to underscore her as a subject. It also highlights an important trait in her character, namely her sense of independence and tenacity of purpose. We first meet her in the village after an old man has berated Eugene for his false sense of identity. About Auntie Ifeoma, Kambili says:

Auntie Ifeoma came the next day, in the evening [...] Her laughter floated upstairs into the living room where I sat reading. I had not heard it in two years, but I would know that cackling, hearty sound anywhere. Auntie Ifeoma was as tall as Papa, with a well-proportioned body. She walked fast, like one who knew just where she was going and what she was going to do there. And she spoke the way she walked. (71).

Note that Kambili is the one telling us about the other character. In doing that Kambili does not only highlight the qualities in the character but she also underscores the contrast between Ifeoma and Eugene. As the family meets in the village to celebrate Christmas, Kambili tells us about Auntie Ifeoma. She says: "I watched every movement she made..." (76). And later she says, in addition:

Every time Auntie Ifeoma spoke to Papa, my heart stopped then started again in a hurry. It was the flippant tone; she did not seem to recognize that it was Papa, that he was different, special. I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut and get some of that shiny bronze lipstick on my fingers. (77).

In this instance, Kambili tells us about her aunt but at the same time she reveals a new perspective in the narrative. This perspective is signified in the expression: "she did not seem to recognize that it was Papa, that he was different, special. I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut..." Contrary to Kambili's amazement, Auntie Ifeoma is certainly aware that she is addressing Eugene. But what Kambili has not recognised at this stage in the narrative is that Auntie Ifeoma has an entirely different set of motivations. She speaks out of a different perspective that translates as a conscious negation of the perception of Eugene as a "god". As we have seen earlier Eugene has a self-image of himself that makes him construct others in terms of "ownership". It is this self-image that Auntie Ifeoma's flippant tone is meant to demystify. She insists: "Eugene let the children come out with us" (77). Kambili observes that she sounded irritated and her voice was slightly raised. Eugene is ruled by a sense of fear; that is fear of contamination from what he perceives as pagan values. Accordingly, his perspective is dominated by closure as exemplified in the closed doors, the high walls that barricade the family house both at Enugu and in the village. It is manifest in the big gates to his compounds and the schedules that rule the children's lives. Auntie Ifeoma's perspective is animated by openness, creativity, expressiveness and by possibility. Thus, rather than being contained in the cold living room, she insists that the children should "come out with us". This creativity and expressiveness is there on that "bronze lipstick" on her lips. And Kambili wonders: "she laughs so easily, so often. They all did, even little Chima [Auntie Ifeoma's last child]" (85).

The more direct opposition to Eugene's perspective is Auntie Ifeoma's trenchant disapproval of her brother's false sense of piety. Her point of attack is rooted in Eugene's pathological relationship with his father. Their father, Papa-Nnukwu is eighty years old. As Auntie Ifeoma drives him and the children out for sightseeing at Christmas, the old man says: "look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries." (83). What the old man laments here is his son's lack of care in the face of wealth. Eugene has branded his father as a pagan. It is this same opinion that forms Auntie Ifeoma's point of attack. She says:

But you know Eugene quarrels with the truths that he does not like. Our father is dying, do you hear me? Dying. He is an old man, how much longer does he have, *gbo*? Yet Eugene will not let him into this house, will not even greet him. *O joka!* Eugene has to stop doing God's job. God is big enough to do his own job. If God will judge our father for choosing to follow the way of our ancestors, then let God do the judging, not Eugene. (95–96).

First, we should note the word “truths” used in this assertion by Auntie Ifeoma. From ideological consideration it means the erosion of an absolute subject and, therefore, the erosion of grand truth conditions. Through Auntie Ifeoma, Adichie underscores a vision of the existence of multiple subjects and therefore possible truth conditions. Secondly, Kambili reports to us what her aunt says. But in reporting this she also reveals what the other character sees as corrupt in the perspective of Eugene.

Auntie Ifeoma's perspective brings us to the role of reproduction in the relations between subjects. In order to explain this, we need to recall Althusser's thesis namely: that “all ideological state apparatuses whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production” (Althusser 1971: 154). Even though Adichie's novel is not concerned directly with the issue of economic production, that is, the type of concern that is central, say, in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1970), yet Althusser's concern with reproduction has pertinence in the relationship between Eugene and Auntie Ifeoma. Ordinarily, the two are related biologically as brother and sister. But that biological relationship is reproduced ideologically through language. In this regard she interrogates the underlying certainties that have informed her brother's actions. Eugene's abandonment of their old father on the assumption that Papa-Nnukwu is a pagan is one of such certainties that need to be questioned.

Eugene conflates reality within his narrow and fanatical orbit. Thus Auntie Ifeoma observes: “You know that the members of our *umunna* [kindred group], in fact everybody in Abba, will tell Eugene only what he wants to hear. Do our people not have sense? Will you pinch the finger of the hand that feeds you?” (96). Eugene's position is, in fact, a negation of the basic principle in Igbo cosmology. This is the principle that: “No man however great can win judgment against all the people” (99). Eugene may have become prosperous on account of his success as an entrepreneur. But his acquired sense of subjectivity has become the basis for negating the principles that secure his people's identity. The dialectical import of Auntie Ifeoma's perspective is moored in this need for holism, the fact that subjects in the postcolonial African context should be responsible. Their subjectivity should empower them to secure the fusion of the community and its identity. This intersects with an important thread in the dialectical paradigm. As Hegel (1970: 116) had underscored: “Dialectic as the latent tendency outwards by which the fixity [one sidedness] and limitation of the predicates of understanding is seen in its true light...”

It is important to note that what animates this relationship is the family ideological state apparatus. We have made a reference to this earlier when we used the term “domestic ideology”. At the same time, what we see from Auntie Ifeoma’s assertion above is a conscious attempt at reproduction that is, reproducing the ideological perspective that animates Eugene’s actions. The instrument for this reproduction is language. Accordingly language becomes instrumental in reproducing imaginary relations between subjects. This forms an important lesson in the attempt to constitute African postcolonial discourse. We will see the effect of this attempt at reproducing ideological relations as we now move to the third level of perspective that is represented by Kambili.

### **Kambili’s perspective**

Auntie Ifeoma’s self-consciousness and refusal to be contained in the limits established by her brother has awakened a new consciousness in the main narrator and character, Kambili. In the denouement of the narrative (see pages 296–307) we witness an account of Kambili playing the key role of leadership in the family. At this time, her father is dead and Jaja is in prison. Her mother suffers from nervous breakdown. Auntie Ifeoma and her children have migrated to the United States. She arranges for herself and her mother to visit her brother in prison. In the course of that we are told that Jaja’s release is imminent. Thus she says to her mother:

We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we’ll go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma [...] We’ll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus [...] I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama’s shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles. (306–07).

Before this passage Kambili tells us that Jaja is about to be released from detention. He has been in detention without trial for nearly three years. She says his shoulders “have sagged in the thirty-one months that he has been here” (300). At the same time she reports on the nature of the penal system in postcolonial Nigeria. It is characterised by bribery and corruption, “our knowing the right people to bribe” and she reports on the plight of inmates of prisons who have to wait for trial for years, “Oladipupo, the chief of his cell – has been awaiting trial for eight years” (299). Also, she reports on the deplorable condition of the cells: “Jaja is back in his old cell, so crowded that some people have to stand so that others can lie down. Their toilet is one black plastic bag” (299). What emerges from these reports is the relationship between the said and the unsaid. That is to say, that here we have evidence of Adichie’s commitment to make the silences of her materials speak. This is because even though she sets out to narrate the visit to the prison and the possibility of Jaja’s release, she uses the opportunity in order to illuminate the corrupt penal system in postcolonial Nigeria.



As we return to the passage quoted above we will see that the dominant feature is Kambili's emergence into agency. At this stage of the narrative she ceases to be the girl who is interpellated into the dominant subject represented by her father. On the contrary she emerges as a subject in her own right who is capable of taking decisions and carrying out responsibilities. The new role in her life is dramatised in the use of the pronominal "I". The "I" which is repeated in the passage brings her into prominence. She therefore functions as a centre of initiatives. In this regard she is represented as the one that writes out checks which is an indication of her authority as subject. Apart from this she is the one to reassure her ailing mother. She says: "I smile at Mama and reach out to touch her arm, to calm her." In this regard Kambili is acting out the truth of her name. Her name in Igbo means "That I too may live". Accordingly, living for her manifests in what Adrienne Rich (1993: 166–77) has termed as "awakening".

We have seen this sense of awakening in the leadership role she is playing in the family. This awakening also manifests in her new consciousness of her sexuality. In the next section we will highlight some of the indices of this new consciousness. It is important to underscore that the awakening to her sexuality and her role in the family are in conformity with what Ogundipe-Leslie has earlier described as the commitment of the female writer. She has argued that the woman's first sense of commitment as a writer is a knowledge of her body; that is knowledge of the biological fact of being woman which will include the fact of menstruation, pregnancy etc. The second level of commitment according to Ogundipe-Leslie (1987: 2–3) must manifest in a sense of social responsibility to society.

### **Kambili's coming to terms with her sexuality**

As we have noted a consequence of this new awareness manifests as Kambili's coming to terms with her sexuality. In the following section, therefore, we will explore instances of this new consciousness. Sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive by nature alien and of necessity, disobedient to a power that exhausts itself trying to subdue it and often fails to control it entirely. It appears rather as an especially dense transfer point of relations of power between men and women, young people and old people. *The New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (2004) defines sexuality as: "The quality of being sexual i.e. patterning to sex, to difference of sex or to the satisfaction of the sexual instinct; the state of being either male or female (gender); sexual desires and their gratification."

From this primary significance, sexuality is about people's social and biological make-up, and the culturally constituted differences, which serve to distinguish them. The third definition links up sexuality with its Latin origin, *sexualis*. At this primary level it is apparent that sexuality refers to either differences between genders or to

biological features or physiology. This primary definition points to the implicit difference between gender and sex. As some commentators have observed sex refers to biological differences that mark people as female or male. Gender, by contrast, is about people's social make-up and the culturally constructed differences that distinguish them as feminine or masculine. These differences are marked in terms of social roles, dress, and expectations.

The crucial issue, however, is to apprehend how a novel such as *Purple Hibiscus* intervenes through the issue of sexuality in the demystification of patriarchal violence. The key in this intervention resides in the basic opposition between sex and gender. As we have seen, although sex is determined by anatomy, the main concepts about masculinity and femininity are culturally defined. It is through this cultural process then that patriarchy exercises control over the female gender while instituting conditions of violence at the detriment of the woman. By creating conditions of contrasts, for example, whereby male emerges as the superior active being while female is predominantly passive, patriarchy inhibits the free expression of female sexuality. Whereas male sexuality is openly expressed and even required, various cultural forms are used to police and suppress female sexuality. The more obvious instrument of cultural repression of female sexuality is the institution of female circumcision.

The desire for the expression of sexuality in *Purple Hibiscus* can be best represented in an assertion by Helene Cixous (2005: 8), namely: "The curtains have raised themselves like eyelids, uncovering the clear pupil: the luminous body of Bathsheba." In the course of the action, the expression of sexuality manifests in the relationship between Kambili and Reverend Father Amadi. That relationship follows the traditional adage of leaving the hearth to find the heart. In other words, by leaving the patriarchal enclosure in Enugu in the course of their visit to Nsukka, Kambili discovers her innate but repressed ability to express her sexuality. That discovery can be captured in the image of the curtain and the interconnected link between eyelids and pupil. The meeting with Amadi is like the partings of the eyelids to enable Kambili see herself as she truly is. We will highlight textual instances that manifest this expression of sexuality.

Kambili's attraction to Amadi is announced with flourish as he comes to visit at Auntie Ifeoma's residence at Nsukka. We are told: "He had a singer's voice, a voice that had the same effect on my ears that Mama working Pears baby oil into my hair had on my scalp." (135). And later, "he spoke so effortlessly as if his mouth were a musical instrument that just let sound out when touched" (138). Again she confesses, "I could not help staring at him because his voice pulled me" (148). The common core that binds all these indications of Kambili's attraction is her consciousness of the *other*. More importantly, this consciousness is expressed directly through her perspective. Here, we see her as a person, a young woman who is capable of expressing her

feelings for a man. This is in contrast to the traditional patriarchal constructs that subtly prohibit female expression for male attraction and desire for sex. As long as Kambili is helmed in between the high walls with electrified wires of the family compound, she cannot experience the joy of self-expression and knowledge of her own sexuality. In this sense, then, the trip to Nsukka becomes an eloquent dramatisation of a feminist demystification of patriarchal violence.

Related to Kambili's coming to self-knowledge is the issue of space and revelation. That is to say that the clearing of a definite space brings about the opportunity for insight and awareness. Again Nsukka as the alternative space is the place where Mama also gains the opportunity to tell of her own experience of violence. Thus as she arrives at Nsukka she narrates of the experience of her battering. She says: "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 [...]" (248).

Note the way language functions here in order to bring about the demystification of patriarchal violence. First our attention is drawn to the known which has become tradition, namely: "the small table" and the "family Bible". These objects form part of the establishment in Eugene's house at Enugu. But note also, "Your father broke it [table] on my belly." The use of the active voice in relation to table reinforces the status of both the object (table) and character (Eugene) as symbols of tradition. On the surface it may seem as if Eugene has done any harm to the table. On the contrary the object serves as a weapon that he uses in order to enforce patriarchal violence on the woman. Consequently, it is not the object that suffers but the woman as we see her "blood finished on the floor." Again, the image of the pool of her blood on the floor recalls the earlier image of the broken pieces of Mama's figurines on the floor. All these images build up in order to render Eugene's authority questionable. What is interrogated is not Eugene as an individual as such, but the discursive structure that engenders in him the sense and power to discipline and control the female. It recalls the same sense of discipline that animated Okonkwo's beating of Ojiugo in *Things Fall Apart*.

This rare ability to explore the semiotic potentials of language is indicative of Adichie's signature as a writer. Above all, it links her creative ability to that of other women who have taken to the pen. Very early in the narrative we are told about the étagère, the cup of tea, Mama's loose wrapper and head tie, the silence that rules in the house at Enugu and even the colour purple. All these represent instances of the semiotic quality in her manipulation of language.

In order to explain this semiotic quality we will recall Julia Kristeva's distinction between the symbolic and the semiotic forms of language. Thus in her critique on the notion of *écriture féminine*, Kristeva has used the terms symbolic and semiotic in order to designate the different aspects of language. This distinction is made in her essay

“The system and the speaking subject”. According to her the symbolic aspect is associated with the following: authority, order, fathers, repression, and control. Also, the symbolic aspect maintains the fiction that the self is fixed and unified. She calls it “a language with a foreclosed subject or with a transcendental subject-ego” (Kristeva 1980: 38). The semiotic aspect, by contrast is characterised not by logic and order, but by displacement, slippage, and condensation. The symbolic mode is typical of the patriarchal expressive mode. It perceives the world in terms of categories, dichotomous roles, stasis and causation. The semiotic mode is typical of the female mode of expression. It reflects a perception of the world in terms of ambiguities, pluralities, processes, continuities and complex relationships (Kristeva 1980: 38). This explains the relationship in Mama’s words that present her battering. Thus while she calls attention to objects such as the table, the Bible and floor, these become signs. These objects are condensed and adopted as instruments of displacement.

## Conclusion

*Purple Hibiscus* is exemplary of the signature of women because it adopts the element of voice as a veritable strategy for the constitution of the interplay of subjects and interpellation. Accordingly, the novel negotiates the tension between the two aspects of voice, that of who sees and that of who narrates. Through the homodiegetic character, Kambili, whose name means “that I too may live,” Adichie presents a dialectical situation between characters understood as subjects, with the eventual emergence of Kambili to self-knowledge and condition of social responsibility.

## Note

1. Page references refer to Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003).

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