



Denigrating Influence Of Western Thought And Christianity On The Status Of African Women As Represented In *Purple Hibiscus* By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Abstract: Colonialism left a great impact upon the life and mindset of natives in Nigeria. Even after independence, the colonial masters continued to rule the nation in various forms. They affected the mindset of the natives and impregnated certain beliefs into the psyche of the natives which became a permanent part of their understanding and experiences. The natives found it hard to detach themselves from them. They started doubting their own ways as being illogical. The paper talks of the impact of colonialism and western thought on the role and status of women in the Nigerian society among other issues. Western colonization had an adverse effect on the position of women in the African societies. Colonials showed little respect for women and endorsed patriarchal attitude through various channels. With the establishment of a formal system of education by missionaries in Africa, patriarchal ideologies and notions, which in a way lowered the status of women, were infused into the educational system.

I. Study and Discussion

One of the notions that colonial masters introduced into the education system was that boys are superior to girls and supposed to lead the family; therefore school system would benefit boys more. Similarly, girls were supposed "to stay at home to practice and perfect their domestic skills which included how to behave as appropriate Christian housewives who knew how to sew, cook and maintain proper hygiene" (Azuike 81). It was boys' business to read and write. These ideologies created a huge gender gap between boys and girls which persists even today. This gender bias supported and reinforced the notion that women were weaklings and that they could be treated violently. In a society which already permitted wife battering and violence against women in the name of 'family matters', such notions only degraded the status of women further.

The effectiveness of the ideology is identified and confronted by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Purple Hibiscus* by exposing the ways in which women are treated by the protagonist Kambili's father Eugene. The novel is full of incidents which show his disrespect and prejudice towards women. They are mistreated and even beaten up violently for petty reasons. They are expected to follow the patriarch unquestioningly and the punishment is severe and brutal whenever they fail in their duties.

As the novel *Purple Hibiscus* begins, the role and impact of strict Christian codes in the house of Eugene becomes apparent. The narrator tells us that, "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" (*Purple Hibiscus* 1). The incidence hints at the imbalance that strikes when Jaja does not go to communion and Papa, that is Eugene, the patriarch of the house, tries to punish him. The incidence clearly reveals that Eugene controls as well as punishes the members of his house with his personal version of religion which is symbolized by his punishing Jaja by throwing at him 'the heavy missal.' As long as the people of the house were following him unquestionably, the figurines, which symbolized their silence and obedience, stayed securely in the house. The moment they questioned or disobeyed him, they got broken.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice, Eugene's wife is seen working for the family all the time. She along with Sissy maintains the household. We see her unusually attracted towards some decorative figurines in her house which she frequently cleans. This is her way of suppressing her grief and helplessness. Polishing those figurines provides an outlet for her grief. Her daughter Kambili also watches her mother helplessly cleaning the figurines. Kambili says:

I would go down to see her standing by the étagère with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them. (*Purple Hibiscus* 11)

These figurines come out to be the symbol of her silence and endurance in the house. Like them, she endures every mistreatment in her own house without showing it to anyone. Until the end, she never complains about what her husband does to her. On one occasion when she expresses her reluctance to meet a priest because of her pregnancy, she is beaten up severely by Eugene. His brutal beatings cause her to miscarry on a number of

occasions; leaving her body sapped of energy. At the time of the coup, when Eugene starts facing problems due to his criticism of the military regime through his magazine *The Standard*, again it is Beatrice who has to face his wrath. He lets out his frustration on her and beats her so severely that she suffers another miscarriage. Only once does she recount her experiences to Auntie Ifeoma, her sister-in-law, who lives in Nsukka, she says:

I got back from the hospital today. The doctor told me to rest but I took Eugene's money and asked Kevin to take me to the Park. I hired a taxi and came here... You know that small table where we keep the family Bible?... [Eugene] broke it on my belly. My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes [Hospital]. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save [the pregnancy]. (*Purple Hibiscus* 248)

She leads a life of servitude most of the time. Only in her final act of defiance she seems to have a voice; otherwise she is either a caring mother or an obeying wife. Despite her education, she never questions Eugene's actions. On the contrary, she is thankful that Eugene could marry anyone but chooses not to do so.

Kambili, whom Eugene professes to love a lot, also gets similar treatment from him on numerous occasions. Even she has no voice. She is always desperate to impress her father and make him feel proud of her. She never speaks loudly or laughs in the house. She does not mix with her classmates. Everybody in her class calls her 'backyard snob' because of this. Whenever she tries to speak, she starts having bubbles in her throat. Kambili behaves in this manner because this is what her father prescribes in the house. Her dictator father never provides her the freedom, in which she can feel free and express her feelings openly. Because of this behaviour of Eugene, they develop "the language of the eyes" (*Purple Hibiscus* 305). And when Kambili loses her focus she receives a very harsh treatment from her father. When Kambili tries to keep with her Papa Nnukwu's picture against her father's wish, this is what happens:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control, in a mix of Igbo and English, like soft meat and thorny bones. Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo and... I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of painting... Kicking. Kicking. Kicking.... More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (*Purple Hibiscus* 210-11)

To show her protest against such treatment of women in many societies, Adichie gives us the character of Auntie Ifeoma, who is completely opposite to Beatrice and Kambili. Ifeoma faces a lot of criticism from the society when her husband dies in a car accident which she survives. In the society which she lives in, a widow who lives on her own is not given a respectable status. She is blamed for her husband's death. It is said by the people that her husband died because of her bad luck. We find Ifeoma many a times talking about this attitude of society and making fun of them. She takes care of her entire family on her own, without any support even from her wealthy brother Eugene. Actually it is this self-sustenance and strength that makes her appear bad to the society. The women who are educated and independent are not respected as such in the traditional African society.

In the novel we see that when Ifeoma visits Eugene's home, Kambili feels shocked to see the way she talks and walks in their house. The members of the house always talk in hush tones and walk noiselessly. But Ifeoma walks freely there and talks in a loud voice. She does not show any fear of Eugene and seems to be unaffected by the laws prescribed by him. Kambili tells us:

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. (*PH* 71)

Expressing her concern about the stigmas and taboos that prevent women from having a stronger stance, Adichie says: "Women who speak out against gender injustice are often labeled 'un-African'. This selective calling up of so called African culture is insidious. We have to ask who is benefitting when a woman is silenced in the name of African culture" ('Africa's Women Speak Out' 2005). The logic behind this silencing is very easily derived by the intellectuals worldwide, which is the patriarchal effort to maintain the dominance and control over the women. "Because women who refuse to be men's slaves, who do not passively let themselves to be discriminated against, oppressed and cheated by men, represent a danger for men" (Arndt 159).

Adichie associates these prejudices and tendencies with Christian values which colonials propagated in order to prove their superiority. Many of their teachings were in total contrast to the native African ways and beliefs. They made them believe that whatever that was white and associated to it was superior to everything native and black. Those who followed them blindly ended up confused hybrids like Eugene. They could neither accept Christianity in its fullness nor could they erase the native influence from their lives.

Eugene's conviction to act as the deputy of god and right the wrongs reinforces the corroding influence of colonial education. His sister, who is outspoken and candid about the things she witnesses, shows her frustration and concern at his fanatic urge to correct everything. She says that, "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." (*Purple Hibiscus* 95-96).

Eugene believes in imposing rules and restrictions on others but he himself is not sure about his preaching. He shows great care and generosity towards the poor and helps them with money and food regularly. But when it

comes to helping his sister who is struggling to keep her family together during the atmosphere of military coup, he remains indifferent. He does not let even his old father live with him for his refusal to give up the native ways. He discourages even his children to meet him in spite of their love for their grandfather. Grandfather dies in Ifeoma's house and even then Eugene seems to be unmoved.

Ifeoma makes a correct observation about him when she says that "Eugene quarrels with the truths he does not like" (*Purple Hibiscus* 95). The hypocrisy of Eugene comes out very clearly when he talks about the freedom of speech in the country. "*The Standard*, spoke out so much on the part of truth and justice that *Amnesty World* thought it fit and proper to confer on him the human rights award. Yet in his home paradoxically, there is no freedom" (Ogwude 115)! His family members are not allowed to express their feelings. The fear of violence always haunts them.

The violence and inhuman treatment that family members suffer in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* seem exaggerated and unreal to some Western readers. But these seemingly unreal situations are the fact of life for some people in certain societies which are even acceptable and usual there. Commenting on the situation, Fwangyil says:

The oppressive and dehumanizing situations women undergo in this novel seem extraordinary, but these are real life stories that have been modified and recreated for the society's awareness. This novel is, in effect, a dramatic indictment of the oppressive attitude of men towards women and children that they are supposed to love and care for. It therefore has direct relevance to our contemporary society. (Fwangyil 262-63)

The character of Eugene thus serves to drive home the role of colonial education in degrading the role and position of women inside the home and society. While tradition upholds the importance of the female in the society, Eugene, under the influence of missionary education, mistreats the women in his family. He worships the Christian beliefs and denounces his roots. In this process, he imbibes the false ideals and notions of Christianity rather than going for the actual teachings of the religion and emerges as the conflicted hybrid who cannot sort out his loyalties. Especially his treatment of the women establishes the association between the low status of women and the colonial education for men which tried to mould them in the framework of the western thought. Ironically, this led to the emergence of half-breeds who were neither Africans nor English but hanging in the gap between the two cultures.

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