

The Foibles of Adichie's Female Characters in Purple Hibiscus

Paul O. Uzoigwe

Abstract

This paper interrogates Adichie's characters in Purple Hibiscus in order to ascertain true Afro-centric females and or males. It invokes feminism from an African perspective while throwing highlight on the shades of the said feminist theories which preceded the various shades of African feminism. A critique of the female characters who (ought to) represent the best ideals of feminist movement is therefore entreated. Characters such as Kambili, Beatrice, and Aunty Ifeoma are investigated in their dispositions and outlook as model female characters. Their pursuit of self-realisation/assertion in Eugene's male-dominated world encounters steady difficulties albeit challenges. Aunty Ifeoma's career as a university lecturer faces the great challenge of pulling through the ungodly military regime that tends to oust university traditions and autonomy. Whereas Aunty Ifeoma stands up (squarely) to Eugene's fool-proof dominance, Beatrice and Kambili remain weaklings and subservient. However, Aunty Ifeoma's towering gait bends to the ruthless military invasion of both the country and university system. Beatrice's and Kambili's failures at the home front and Aunty Ifeoma's mistakes at her work place all translate into weaknesses and they, therefore, become wanting in their expectations. Male characters such as Jaja, Reverend Father Amadi and Papa Nnukwu, however, deconstruct the female characters by reversing the binaries that set female characters as models of Afro-centric feminism in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus.

Keywords: Afro-centric Feminism(s), male dominance, self realization/assertion, deconstruction, subservient/weak females

Introduction

This paper aims to put female characters in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* in perspective in order to ascertain their characterization of which their outlook and disposition are paramount in the realization of their motivations through the lens of feminism and or its derivative theories. M.H. Abrams and G.G. Harpham state that "A character may remain essentially 'stable' from the beginning to end of a work or may undergo a radical change, as the result of a crisis" (33). In the above delineation, a character is seen in the light of a stable personality who may become 'unstable', given the narrow contrite of the character's situation as designed by fate. In sum the expectation of Abrams and Harpham is...

Whether a character remains stable or changes, the reader of a traditional and realistic work expects "consistency" - the character should not suddenly break off and act in a way not plausibly grounded in his or her temperament as we have already come to know it. (33)

The task before us in this paper is, therefore, to investigate the female characters in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and find out how stable (or unstable) they are as epitome of feminist constructs that are meant to have equal rights among the males of their given milieu.

Women's struggle for freedom from the stranglehold of men in Western culture and even beyond the West has featured as early as the 16th century. Zainab Alkali in "Gender Politics and Sexual Dynamics..." informs us that,

Indeed, the history of Gender studies indicated that the genesis of the creation of the programme has its roots deep in earlier socio-political movement which dates as far back as the 16th century from where we have our earliest records of women struggle. (3)

Feminism as well started making waves during the eve of the 19th century. Charles E. Bressler submits that "in the late 1700, a faint voice crying in the wilderness in opposition to such patriarchal and defaming opinions against women arose and began to be heard" (145). Since then, a period earmarked with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, feminism and its synonymous concepts/theories have continued making the rounds within the

intellectual circles around the globe. Even when the precursors of feminist movements were not feminists per-se, there were other subsequent, first wave, second wave, feminist movements and the multiplicity of ideologies that formed what Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires call 'Feminisms'. In the same vein, various voices have emerged from the Black world distinguishing between Black and White feminisms.

In recent times, Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires agree that: "At a time when the current trend is most definitely to denounce totalizing theories, to celebrate difference, recognize 'otherness', and acknowledge the multiplicity of feminisms, any attempt to define or represent 'feminism' will inevitably prove problematic" (4). Likewise, the African/Black variant of the same women's movement subscribes to the same multiplicity that beset theories of gender studies. Kolawole, in this guise, submits: "Universalization of womanhood therefore becomes a dilemma and new configurations are emerging. Western feminism is being challenged for posing to be global while in reality it is racially construed and culture-specific" (18). It therefore suffices that cross-temporally, ideologies and theories on women's movement are bound to bring to the fore differing positions among the proponents of feminism from different climes.

Our encounter here shall therefore focus specifically on the African version of feminist movement since there are several movements that cross temporally. Although we can encounter varying ontological means around the feminist movements across cultures, there is yet a common place that puts the human sexes in perspective of where to start and where to stop in determining the biological and social boundaries of man (male) and woman (female). The argument on the sexes (from African perspective) forms from Afro-centric feminist theories. Such Afro-centric theories are variants such as 'womanism', 'femalism', 'stiwanism' and 'motherism' (Ezeigbo, 13). In looking at the above theories, we shall engage Adichie's female characters in *Purple Hibiscus* in order to make a statement on their motivation as females.

Synopsis

Adichie's female characters here sought after asserting themselves in Mr. Eugene's dominated world. Mr. Eugene represents patriarchy that must be revolted against and as well decentred as the power centre in the novel. As a micro-society, Eugene's household, comprising his wife (Beatrice), his

daughter (Kambili), his son (Jaja), and his steward (Sisi), Kevin, his driver, and a host of other employees of his several establishments, is subsumed in the stranglehold of Eugene's devout Catholicism. His larger-than-life personality can be seen in the way the Reverend Father Benedict uses him to illustrate the gospels during Mass.

Look at Brother Eugene. He could have chosen to be like other Big Men in this country, he could have decided to sit at home and do nothing after the coup. Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us have stood up for the truth? How many of us have reflected the Triumphant Entry? (*Purple Hibiscus*, 13).

He is said to use the *Standard* (his media brand) to speak the truth even though it meant the paper lost advertising (13). Kambili, the narrator, further reveals how important her father remains to St. Agnes Parish:

On some Sundays, Benedict talked about things everybody already knew, about Papa making the biggest donations to St. Peter's pence and St. Vincent de Paul. Or about Papa paying for cartons of communion wine, for the new oven, for the new wing to St. Agnes Hospital where father Benedict gave extreme unction. (*Purple Hibiscus*, 13)

His towering gait in his home town, Abba, is conferred with the title, “Omeleora”, “The One Who Does for the Community” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 64). Eugene's dominance in the novel is fool-proof in dwarfing his counterpart females.

Beatrice is portrayed as a character of slight capabilities. Sisi, the steward, takes care of her home from the kitchen to the menial chores of the home, where Chinweizu believes is the power centre which women monopolize (11). She (Beatrice) lives under the shadow of Eugene; she is the type of mother whose countenance in the face of any bickering or serious domestic issues remains unwavering. Thus: “Will you replace the figurines?” I asked. I could smell the chalky deodorant under her arms. Her brown face, flawless but for the recent jagged scar on her forehead, was expressionless” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 23). After the fight brought home by Eugene for Jaja's refusal to have Holy Communion twice in a row, Beatrice could not take a stand when asked the above question by Kambili. The recent jagged scar on her face is of course the handiwork of Eugene.

Kambili, the protagonist and the first person narrator, bears the mien of a very timid person. It has to be Jaja any time the words are strung together correctly before Eugene or any other person.

When he hugged Jaja and then me, his hands were shaking. “I have never been without you two for more than a day”
I did not know what to say, but Jaja nodded and said, “We will see you in a week.” (*Purple Hibiscus* 117)

Each time Jaja or Amaka or Obiora speaks, Kambili is left with either a lumpy throat or a tightening throat. Jaja will always make intelligible utterances and Kambili will wish she has said it (*Purple Hibiscus*, 33). Kambili and Beatrice (her mother) share a world of muteness and at best speak with their spirits than with their lips (*Purple Hibiscus*, 23-4). Until Kambili's encounter with Nsukka (Aunty Ifeoma's residence), she never knew that females like Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka (Ifeoma's daughter) can assume masculinity.

Aunty Ifeoma, with her flaws, remains a model character for the females. She defies the male subservient notion of the females as the non-significant other. By Aunty Ifeoma's refusal to remain “the other, an object whose existence is defined and interpreted by the male, the dominant being in society “(de Beauvoir, qtd. in Bressler, 146), she is quite significant in her masculinity as she poses “admissible to the same pursuit as well as the men” (see Plato's *Republic* 154-5). Her place in the university as a lecturer shows that she holds a vantage position just like every other man. The early demise of her husband leaves her with three under-aged children whom she strives to raise alone. She stands up to Eugene, her only brother, the way his wife and children and any other person could not. In her field of endeavour, she is never lulled by the raging storm of military dictatorship which from time to time tries to submerge the autonomy of the university system.

In comparison, Aunty Ifeoma's household is nothing like her brother's. Eugene's affluence and Aunty Ifeoma's lowly lifestyle can be clearly captured in Kambili's words during their first visit to Nsukka. Her experiences start as they arrive at Aunty Ifeoma's residence at Marguerite Cartwright Avenue with its “bland building with peeling blue paint and with television aerials sticking out from the verandahs” (*Purple Hibiscus* 120). Inside the apartment, Kambili feels she could reach out and touch the ceiling because of how low it is (*Purple Hibiscus*, 121), the seams of the cushions were frayed and slipping apart, it was the only sofa in the living room; other chairs with the centre table were cane

(*Purple Hibiscus*, 122). The dining table was made of wood that cracked in dry weather; the dining chairs were mismatched; the plates, too, were mismatched – plastic ones and plain glass ones bereft of dainty flowers of silver lines (*Purple Hibiscus*, 127-8).

However, Eugene's mode of living depicts luxury at its best. Kambili confesses that Amaka's hut-like room, where “the cement floors were rough, did not let my feet glide over them the way the smooth marble floors back home did” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 124), is nothing like her room in Enugu, “where the high ceilings gave our rooms an airy stillness” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 21). Though both families are of the Catholic faith, Eugene's extremism alongside his Parish Priest's, remains biased of the people's tradition as he calls and treats his father, whom he ostracizes, as heathen. Aunty Ifeoma rather accommodates her father as a traditionalist and cares for him throughout his life time. Unlike Eugene's Father Benedict, Aunty Ifeoma's Father Amadi is liberal, a disposition Eugene abhors. Thus:

“That young priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal Churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him,” Papa said...
(*Purple Hibiscus*, 37)

Aunty Ifeoma's children are nothing compared with Eugene's. They are free with life and are outspoken. Eugene's children are always dumbfounded. Even though they take first position in school, they are always so quiet even before rural dwellers (65). In spite of all that life has given them, laughter and words seem far-fetched in their lives. Kambili relives her experience in Nsukka:

Laughter floated over my head. Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak.
(*Purple Hibiscus* 128)

As females, Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka, her daughter, are at polarized ends with Kambi and Beatrice, her mother. Kambili wonders how Amaka speaks without lumps in her throat unlike herself. Beatrice is challenged by the way Aunty Ifeoma squares up to her husband, Eugene. As a result of these realities, Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka become models for Beatrice's and Kambili's self realization.

Foibles of the Females

Kambili's personality begins to materialize after their first visit to Aunty Ifeoma's residence in Nsukka. Despite uncondusive how the Nsukka residence is in comparison to their houses in Enugu and Abba, Kambili's freedom begins to be realized in Nsukka. Comparatively, Kambili is caged in the vast walls of her room in Enugu while she is free in Amaka's very small, hut-like, room in Nsukka. The air in this miniature room does not tighten her breath the way it does in her four-storey white majestic house with the spurting fountain in front in Abba. She (Kambili) comes to love Amaka whose vocal demeanour and boldness used to be her bane. Amaka, in turn, also begins to accommodate Kambili's shortcomings after having to live with her for some time. Amaka comes to terms with Kambili's erstwhile life of restrictions:

“Do you have a schedule at home that you follow everyday?” Amaka asked.

“Yes”, Jaja said.

“Interesting. So now rich people can't decide what to do day by day, they need a schedule to tell them” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 132).

As blood relations, Amaka helps chart the course for Kambili's development.

Reverend Father Amadi's presence in Kambili's life also helps Kambili in her development as a teenager. Kambili's 'snail sense' finds love in her platonic relationship with Fr. Amadi. Father Amadi's affections and overture help Kambili, as much as Amaka's companionship does, in her self-realization. Nsukka, therefore, provides her with a neighbourly atmosphere of real people with real experiences. The realities of Aunty Ifeoma's apartment and neighbourhood bring Kambili close to nature and natural people, and this encounter teaches her a great deal. She also has her lessons from Aunty Ifeoma's garden which brings her closer to nature than her superfluous mansions in Enugu and Abba.

Unfortunately, Kambili fails to be the girl of her dreams because of the cloning her father's influence has on her. She could hardly live out a passing day without being bemused at her father's spirit. Jaja experiences great/tremendous change and confronts his father afterwards. He refuses to take the Holy Communion with cogent reasons like, “The wafer gives me bad breath. And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me” (*Purple Hibiscus*, 14). With Kambili, things are quite different. She believes so much in her father; she adheres strictly to her father's schedule and demands; she doesn't budge even when her father metes out inhuman treatment on her for coming second in class,

for desecrating the Eucharistic fast and for relating with Papa Nnukwu and the traditional festivals. She craves to always please her father but finds herself always failing to do so. Until her father's death she keeps on believing he is undying: "I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 290-1).

Among her peers, Kambili is portrayed as a misfit. In her primary school, she could not engage Chinwe Jideze and the other girls in a one-on-one conversation; and, as a result she is misconstrued a snub. She could not freely initiate the recital of the national pledge when Mother Lucy asks her to. In her own assessment, she does not quite measure up with her age mates such as Amaka: "It was so unlikely that we were the same age, fifteen. She seemed so much older, or maybe it was her striking resemblance to Aunty Ifeoma or the way she stared me right in the eyes" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 87).

The two forces in Kambili's life that propel her to the right course seem to desert her in the lurch. Kambili and Amaka do not want Aunty Ifeoma to succeed in getting the visa. Both girls have a shared dream that will materialize in the nearest future. Kambili's love for Father Amadi is hampered by his priestly condition and as a result, Amaka envisages a time when both girls will join in the struggle for optional celibacy for Catholic Priests (*Purple Hibiscus* 285). It becomes nostalgic for Kambili and Amaka that Aunty Ifeoma's visa to America will put an end to their brooding sorority. Above all, the idea that Father Amadi, who has been the family's best friend and Kambili's most beloved, will be leaving for missionary work in Germany, is the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

Aunty Ifeoma here fails to meet the expectations of her personality. That she has to emigrate to the United States thereby cutting short Kambili's and Amaka's expectations is as a result of her unguarded criticism of the military government in power. She becomes very loud and vehement in her refusal to accept the notion of a sole administrator in the university. Her colleague has to visit her home to reveal that "They said there is a list circulating, Ifeoma, of lecturers who are disloyal to the university. They said they might be fired. They said your name is on it." (*Purple Hibiscus*, 227). In deviance, she strongly responds:

"I am not paid to be loyal. When you speak the truth, it becomes disloyalty."

"Ifeoma, do you think you are the only one who knows the truth? Do you think we do not all know the truth, eh? But,

gwakenem, will the truth feed your children? Will the truth pay their school fees and buy their clothes?" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 227-8)

Aunty Ifeoma takes exception to the above position given her displeasure with things happening within the university and decides to join Philipa, her friend in the United States, even if it means being a second-class citizen. She has her mind made up to leave, notwithstanding her friend's (and colleague's) Chide:

"So you, too, Ifeoma," she finally said.

"It is not about me, Chiaku." Aunty Ifeoma paused.

"Who will teach Amaka and Obiora in university? The educated ones leave, the ones with the potential to right the wrongs. They leave the weak behind. The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot resist. Do you not see that it is a cycle? Who will break that cycle?" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 249)

The portrait of Aunty Ifeoma above is flawed with smear of disillusionment. Having believed firmly in the university system and having shown qualities of masculinity to Eugene, it is quite disheartening that Ifeoma, who stood by Papa Nnukwu, will have to abandon what Papa Nnukwu stands for and represents in his lifetime. Her character flaws swell so much that her apartment has to be searched by the military who later quit her after accusation of supporting insurrections by the students. Just like in her university community, she encourages Kambili and Jaja to alter the order of Eugene's household in several ways. First, she insists and prevails on Eugene to allow her take the children to see the festivals that made the children end up on Father Benedict's confession seat. Second, she tells a lie that brought Eugene to parting with his children for the first time: "We can't even have a conversation. After all, I had to use a pilgrimage to Aokpe to get him to say yes to the children's visiting us" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 145).

Again and again, Aunty Ifeoma relives her character flaws in the story. She gets the children visit her and then she starts removing Eugene's hands from his children. Upon arrival, she divests them of their schedules and in response to their protest, she teaches them how to be deviant: "if you do not tell Eugene, eh, then how will he know that you did not follow the schedule, gbo? You are on holiday here and it is my house, so you will follow my own rules" (*Purple Hibiscus* 132). Meanwhile, the mode of prayers and the general mode of worship among other household matters decimate the labourious works

Eugene has done in the early formations of his children over a decade. As a Christian of the Catholic Faith, she fails to lead her father into the faith she belongs and upholds even until death, a disposition that reflects an attitude of sitting on the fence.

Beatrice, Eugene's beloved and trusted wife, finally decides to channel her monopolized power centre to harm. What Beatrice fails to accomplish as a wife, which is freedom from Eugene, her oppressive husband, she achieves through the wrong choice of murder in connivance with Sisi. After Eugene's death, an autopsy at the St. Agnes Hospital shows that Eugene has been poisoned.

“They did an autopsy,” she said. “They have found the poison in your father's body.”

“Poison?” I said.

“I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor.”
(*Purple Hibiscus*, 294)

For the many injuries inflicted on Beatrice and her humanity by Eugene, for her freedom as a woman, she deals one death-blow against Eugene. Unrepentantly, she serves her husband's tea with continued little portions and small doses that amount to mercy killing.

The foregoing at its best is replete with females who reject subjugation by their male counterparts but fail to assert their humanity in the right way. Although Kambili loves her father against all odds, his demise does not make her mourn because Father Amadi's letters keep coming and she revels in their successions:

“His letters dwell on me. I carry them around because they are long and detailed, he wrote that he did not want me to seek the whys, because... whys simply do not exist... He did not mention Papa—he hardly mentions Papa in his letters. (*Purple Hibiscus*, 307).

Amaka and Obiora also write her from the United States, but her most cherished is that of Father Amadi. Ranging from Hudson-Weems' Africana womanism, to Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, to Acholonu's Motherism, to Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism, to Ezeigbo's Snail Sense Feminism, Aunty Ifeoma's misgivings give her away and she ends up abandoning home and everything. Beatrice (with Sisi) follows suit and in the end stains her hands with the blood of her husband, Eugene, whom she ought to have engaged in the

debate of self realization and assertion.

In a deconstructionist view, male characters such as Jaja and Father Amadi foreground ideal womanism and the like which most of the female characters negate. If African womanism, according to Ogunyemi, is steeped in African communalism (qtd. in Ezeigbo, 20) and according to Kolawole, confronts destructive traditions but comes to terms with the limits of individuality (qtd. in Ezeigbo, 22), the above mentioned males are worthy of its representation. Jaja starts the revolution needed in his father's house by confronting Eugene's doctrinal excesses. It is Jaja that devotes the most of his time in Aunty Ifeoma's garden that he supplanted the purple hibiscuses from Nsukka to Enugu. It is Father Amadi that charts the course for young folks of Nsukka to find their feet in life, especially Kambili and Aunty Ifeoma's children. Papa Nnukwu also remains accommodationist. Kambili intones: "I was surprised that he prayed for Papa with the same earnestness that he prayed for himself and Aunty Ifeoma" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 175). In spite of Eugene's extreme disparity towards him, he forgives him without any apology. These male characters, however, beset a binary opposition that foregrounds best ideals for womanism, which the females ought to have represented.

Conclusion

In summary, Adichie's females in *Purple Hibiscus* are seen to have undergone radical changes within the text. In their characterization, we see their outlook and disposition as ready females who seek to demystify the mighty man, Eugene. However, their motivations fail to be realized and they could not remain consistent as they end up acting in a way not plausibly grounded in their temperament ab initio.

As we pointed out earlier, Beatrice, unfortunately, does not in any way conform to the expectations of feminism. She fails to engage Eugene in the sustainable dialogue requisite of feminist demands. Her action at last negates the positions of African feminisms which subsist in togetherness, tolerance, temperance and the like. She is bereft of the qualities of an ideal African woman or mother based even on the parameters of African feminisms. In a typical African setting, the totality of her actions and lifestyle has the capacity to discourage potential suitors from looking in the direction of her family for wives. Kambili, as well, fails to assert herself as a strong female. She either hides in the shadow of Eugene or basks in the love of Father Amadi. Amaka's

removal from her is not well received and alone she wanders her lonely life that only sparks of Father Amadi comeliness. Aunty Ifeoma also abandons home when she is needed most. Beneath the foibles of Adichie's main characters in *Purple Hibiscus* studied in this paper, therefore, we are yet to materialize true Afro-centric females.

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