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From Silence to Laughter: A Discovery of the Self A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial historiography interrogates the history written by the colonizers and challenges its authenticity. It analyses and critiques the colonial discourses thereby establishing the ways in which the West perpetuated colonialism. Postcolonial literature reflects the struggle of the colonies to free themselves from the colonization of the land and the mind. This paper attempts to discuss how Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus portrays the African discovery of the self through the life of Kambili Achike, the protagonist, who learns to develop her own perception, trying to free herself from the influence of her oppressive father's world view.

Keywords: History, Postcolonial historiography, Colonizers and colonized.

Theories of colonial discourses have challenged the authenticity of history demonstrating the subjective quality of recorded facts and establishing that the world view of the historians influences their writing and hence history can never totally be objective. Postcolonial historiography proved the history of the colonial period as one-sided, promoting the point of view of the colonizer. As McLeod puts forth, "Under colonialism, colonized people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value system is taught as the best, truest world view. The cultural values of the colonized peoples are deemed as lacking in value or even as being 'uncivilised' from which they must be rescued"(19) Frantz Fanon in his Black Skin, White Mask throws light on the fact that the colonised subject is attributed character by the colonizer and is trained to believe them. History, according to postcolonial

theorists has not always been scientific and objective but has sometimes been a record of mere assumptions of the west. Said points out in his Orientalism how the west described the East:

Yet what gave the Oriental's world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West(48)

History, thus was not only a record of the coloniser's assumptions but also a record intended to establish his superiority over the colonized and hence often lacked veracity. Postcolonial literature focused on undoing the myths created by the West to justify their imperialism, by attempting to expose the mechanisms through which they disseminated colonialism.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a novel that depicts the conflicts that arose during the transitional period in Nigeria after their independence in 1960. The impact of seven decades of colonial rule was such that even after the exit of the British rulers their loyalty to the rulers and their faith in their superiority prevented them from recognizing the value of their own culture. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* tells the story of Kambili, a fifteen year old Nigerian girl and her family. It is a coming of age novel where the story is told from the perspective of Kambili, depicting her growth in the process. The novel brings out the struggles of decolonization of the Nigerians after they got freedom from the British. Adichie portrays the conflicts that arose out of an ineluctable situation where co-existed groups that believed in assimilation and that resisted the coloniser's culture.

The novel depicts the tumultuous post-colonial Nigeria and the confused mind of Kambili parallelly. Kambili, who sees the world through her father's eyes gets an opportunity to develop her own perception when she and her brother happen to stay in their aunt's house when there is a military coup in Nigeria. Kambili's father Eugene is a typical example of a colonised mind. Under the influence of the coloniser's propagation of the superiority of their culture and religion, Eugene follows Catholicism and expects everyone in his family to convert to Catholicism. He reflects and imitates the ruler and is a dictator at home and brooks no opposition. His children are silenced by his tyrannical ways and have lost the power to question or even think beyond what they are directed to do.

Kambili remains a timid and scared girl and turns out, as she grows, to be a silent observer. She is reserved and has but a few friends. Brought up by a tyrant father, she cannot bring herself to express her opinions spontaneously and her conversations are punctuated with stammer and cough. Her father picks her up immediately after the class, making her almost run for the vehicle giving her no time to socialise. Kambili respects her father since he is educated and capable and though rude, thinks of their welfare. Kambili grows in awe of her father and has no questions about his ways till the time she and her brother Jaja go to their aunt's house. Their father's house and the aunt's house look like two different worlds and she is struck by the difference in the atmosphere.

In their aunt's house there was laughter and freedom. At papa's house there was order and silence: Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines in black-ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep. (P 23- 24) They were always silent for fear of irritating their father: "Our steps on the stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays". (31)

In contrast, "Laughter always rang-out in aunty Ifeoma's house and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the wall, all the rooms. Arguments rose as quickly and fell as quickly". (140)

Ifeoma's daughter Amaka is irritated by the strangeness of their behavior since the brother and sister do not communicate freely and do not argue and she asks her mother, "are you sure they are not abnormal mom? She behaved like atulu when my friends came". (141) And when the mother reprimands, she says in self-defense, " she behaves funny. Even Jaja is strange. Something is not right with them", (142)

Kambili observes that aunty Ifeoma encouraged her children to ask questions, to discuss and debate issues. She told them stories to illustrate her points and it was a natural, comfortable atmosphere in their house. Kambili's perceiving eyes notice many conspicuous differences- Aunty Ifeoma's self dependent life and her views in contrast to her own mother's life and views. Aunt Ifeoma tells Kambili's mother who believes that women cannot live without men, "Nwunye m, sometimes life begins when marriage ends." (75)

But what changes Kambili's outlook to a great extent is her encounter with her grandfather Papa Nnukwu whom she considered to be a heathen. Her grandfather's innocent prayers, his love for the grand children and his playfulness show him in a totally different light from her father's description. Impressed by his sincere prayer to the traditional gods, she realises that nothing could be wrong about him though his prayer was different.

She contrasts her father's attitude to that of her aunt towards her grandfather. Aunt Ifeoma follows Catholicism but does not force her views on her father like her brother Eugene Achike. His wife and children suffer because of his obsession with Catholicism and

his tyrannical attitude. When once Kambili is not well enough to take up Eucharistic fast, her mother advises her to take a little food. Eugene beats the mother and daughter severely when he comes to know about it. When Kambili's mother has an abortion, he considers it to be her sin and asks the children to recite a section asking for forgiveness for the mother. His religious fanaticism pushes him to an inhuman level and he believes in punishments to wash away sin.

Eugene is patriotic and has social consciousness. He helps his friend Ade Coker, the editor of a paper when he is in trouble because of the unrest and helps his wife and supports her sustenance when she becomes a widow. He loves his children Kambili and Jaja but is uncompromising about deviations. He exercises his authority in enforcing his notions and believes that he is doing the best for them. He does not believe in the traditional religion and is convinced that one can reach heaven only if one follows Catholicism. Eugene represents the subject who identifies himself with the colonizer. He believes in the superiority of the colonizer, their religion and has fully internalized their values. He behaves exactly like the colonial ruler in forcing down his ideology and principles on the members of his family. He punishes his daughter for being in the same room with her grandfather because the grandfather was a heathen and worshipped native Gods. He punishes Kambili by pouring hot water on her feet for being in the same room with her grandfather. He cries too when she starts screaming and then says, "That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet." (194) Eugene follows Father Benedict who was a strict catholic and believed in physical punishments too.

Kambili also comes under the influence of father Amadi, who is a liberal catholic and who instead of enforcing rules like Eugene, indicates and explains the benefits of following catholic religion. She is able to smile and senses happiness when she is with father Amadi. Adichi juxtaposes the liberal Catholicism practiced by father Amadi with that of the serious outlook of father Benedict and thus supports the space for debate in religion.

The novel presents various characters at different levels of colonial influence: Papa Nnukwu belonging to the old generation remaining uninfluenced by the

coloniser's culture, Eugene and Ifeoma, from the next generation exhibiting the influence of the ruler in their language and religion, though Ifeoma is more democratic and inclusive, Kambili and Jaja just learning to see around and have a better perception of life and evolve from being the silent oppressed to independent individuals voicing their opinion. All these people represent the various levels of colonial impact perceived at the time. Eugene, when he becomes too oppressive and persecutes his wife and children is poisoned and killed by his wife and Jaja takes the blame and goes to prison. This also indicates the ensuing results of the conflicts and intolerance..

Adichi focuses more on the loss of identity because of western influence and the eventual discovery of the self through Kambili. Kambili symbolises Nigerians who gradually learn to free themselves from the coloniser's perceptions and have their own views. She learns to observe and judge. She finds that her aunt's house is more democratic. She feels that there could be nothing wrong about her grandpa though he is a heathen.

Once in her auntys' house she dreams that she is laughing and that her laughter was more like her aunts' laughter. Kambili who couldn't speak even a few words without coughing and pausing could now express her opinions and discuss freely with her aunt and her cousin. Laughter comes easy to her as she realizes: 'I laughed. It seems so easy now, laughter. So many things seemed easy now. Jaja was laughing too as was Amaka...' (284) In fact she even gains strength to protest against the father to save the painting of Papa Nnukwu. Kambili's journey from silence and confusion to expression and knowledge is the story of Africa's decolonization and self discovery.

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