



THE CLASH BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN BELIEFS AS FOUND IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

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ABSTRACT

Chimamanda Adichie, who won the Orange Prize for fiction, was a great admirer of Chinua Achebe, the renowned Nigerian writer. Her work *Purple Hibiscus* garnered rave reviews due to its perceptive characterization and evocative portrayal of a fifteen year old girl's decisive intellectual awakening. It also compellingly etches the constant conflicts between people who adhered to ancient customs and rituals as symbolized by Papa Nnukwu and those who follow modern yet tyrannical faith and customs as ideally portrayed through Kambili's father. This analysis seeks to illuminate such clashes as evidenced in the novel.

1. INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a complex and compelling account which draws the African struggle for a modern Identity into heart of a family's life. Fifteen-year-old Kambili mortally fears her father, a charismatic yet violent Catholic patriarch who, although generous and well respected in the community, is repressive and fanatically religious at home. Escape and the discovery of a new, liberated way of life come when Nigeria is shaken by a military coup, which forces her to live at their aunt's place. In this analysis the good and bad aspects of both traditional and new faith and customs is focused on.

2. TYRANNY IN THE SHADOWS OF NEW FAITH

The Novel has been divided into four segments. The one beginning with the title 'Breaking Gods' is set during a Palm Sunday. Jaja, Kambili's brother refuse to go for holy communion and his enraged father throws his missal in his direction and accidentally breaks the figurines on the 'etager'. Eugene, his father was a stringent and somewhat sadistic follower of the new faith which he had embraced with gusto. A devout adherent who used to wear long gray robes and distribute devotedly ashes to the believers, on Ash Wednesday, enunciating vehemently at the same time, the dictates of the church. He had deep respect for Father Benedict, who was a European missionary who had the duty of admonishing the people of Eugene's parish. Kambili's father who was always generous with anything to do with the church, always used to donate large amounts for building new ovens for baking the host, or refurbishing the new wing of St. Agnes Hospital, all these were means to cloak the true tyrant he was. He used to be merciless with the members of his family and always used to brutally manhandle them, causing a lot of miscarriages in the case of Kambili's mother and frightening Kambili and Jaja into meek submission. As he and Father Benedict symbolizes and represents new beliefs and customs. A lot of themes like need for tolerance and introspection of these new customs come up.

3. BEAUTY OF ANCIENT RITES

If we take the case of ancient rites and rituals which are portrayed in the work, despite its native origin, it seems to possess a universality and endearing simplicity and seems to sing a paean of acceptance. Jaja realizes the beauty of the traditional beliefs when he witnesses a masquerade done by the villagers, in his aunt's place. He is enthralled by the sight of a powerful 'Mmuo', a Spirit warrior. Yet for his father these are nothing more than the pagan heathen rituals, too sinful to be watched. He always used to admonish and punish his children whenever, they indulged in such forbidden sights and scenes. In fact Jaja was prevented from undergoing his initiation rituals, and was ashamed of the fact. His father who was fearless and obstinate when it came to publishing truth in his newspaper, and righteous in that cause, was extremely high handed when he came to the matter of his own children meeting their heathen Grand father, Papa Nnukwu. He was a miser when it came to the matter of spending money on him. Hence Kambili and Jaja missed out a lot when it came to bonding with their own grand father. And missed all his amusing story telling sessions, filled with wisdom from the tribal lore. Kambili was brutally beaten when she was found possessing a portrait of her grand father, which was given to her, to keep as a memento, from Amaka her cousin just after his death. Despite giving money liberally for Papa Nnukwu's pagan funeral rites, Eugene never allowed Kambili and Jaja to attend and perform traditional dance of grand children in his memory. In fact her father was of the opinion that he should be given a catholic funeral initially, but it was Aunt Ifeoma's adamant and resolute stance which closed that matter for ever. Aunt Ifeoma despite being a Christian was more liberal in her attitude and taught her children to be the same. Amaka is a good example. She always used to listen to culturally conscious music, composed by Nigerian musicians, and used to question each and every practices of the church. She was skeptical regarding, the apparition in Aokpe and refused to accept a European name for her confirmation, stating that there was no need to do so when there was more beautiful and

meaningful native names available and was all for optional celibacy. Obiora, her brother equally vehement in pointing out to Father Amadi, the foolishness of sending African priests to reconvert the European countries. Jaja became more rebellious in the atmosphere and began questioning the brutality of his father. He began to assert his rights. Father Amadi too manages to intermix and create a *mélange* by combining the good aspects of traditional and modern faith. He gave answers to the ever persistent qualms regarding her religion tormenting Kambili. He was remembered by her from amongst the countless priests, who used to visit her parish, because of the unconventional method of breaking into Igbo worship songs in the midst of the mass. When Kambili confesses to have been sinful especially because of having shared the same room with Papa Nnukwu, her pagan grandpa, Amadi smiles, and gives a comforting answer, rather than being like father Benedict who presses Kambili to reveal how many extra minutes she spent with Papa Nnukwu. Father Benedict also wanted to know whether she ate any of the native foods sacrificed to idols and asks whether both of them had participated in the ritual involving 'mmuo'. He says "Your understand that it is wrong to take part in pagan rituals, because it breaks the first commandment. Pagan rituals are misinformed superstitions and they are the gate way to hell. ... You must make conscious effort to convert every one who enjoys the ways of heathen" (90). His opinions are ratified by Kambili's father too. He says that they are spot less, as they had confessed having partaken of wicked rites, and that they may not require the cleansing of purgatory if they were to heaven then. He never realizes the mental strain his children are enduring, when they who had been joyfully expecting a younger brother realized to their chagrin that their poor pregnant mother has been brutally punished for refusing to meet Father Benedict because of her physical discomfort and was beaten cruelly in such a way that she miscarried. Kambili finds it difficult to concentrate when she image and visualizes the brutal incident.

There were schedules for everything, ranging from how to spend their free time and how much they ought to study, dictated by their meddling father for them. The result was that she became 'the backyard snob' who mainly because of the fear for her father hardly could find spare time to spend with her class mates. It reached the extent when she could hardly laugh like a normal person or have an opinion for herself. She always used to splutter and made a fool of herself whenever she had to speak to strangers. For her, her father was an omnipresent torturing form of super ego. She became psychologically over submissive to her domineering father. All the opinion she professed with regard to prayers or for that matter concerning almost all religious matters, was meant as an attempt to seek the favour of her father. She even found it a sin to sing aloud during the daily prayer meetings held at her aunt's house.

Her attitude bewilders and at same time exasperates her liberal aunt who for her own good corrects her, that Papa Nnukwu, was not a pagan but a traditionalist. For convincing her about the beauty of his belief, wakes her up one early morning to make her witness, how the elderly man greets every new day. His humbleness and simplicity of belief is very evident in the way he addresses Chikeke. He urges the god "I have wished others well, Chikeke. I have helped those who had nothing with what my hands could (sic) spare. ... Bless my son Eugene. Let the sun not set on his prosperity. ... Chikeke bless the children of my children. Let your eyes follow them away from evil and towards good" (168). He was kind enough not to bear his son a grudge while conducting his daily prayer. There are some instances especially the one, when he asks, father Amadi about his profession, when he learns that he belonged to a group of priests who had to go to different countries to convert people. Papa Nnukwu asks him whether "Our own sons now go to be missionaries (sic) in the white mans land ... but you must never lie to them never teach them to disregard their fathers" (172). It hardly bothers him, that one of them now had to go to the European countries to reconvert the Europeans, who always used every opportunity in their heyday to prattle about the so

called a 'white mans burden' There is a lot of irony in the situation , which professes the need for African priests to convert those from Europe who centuries back had tried to civilize the so pagans through their faith.

Amaka at times makes some bold observations regarding many such situations especially those concerning the apparition near Aokpe .She jeers that it is high time Our Lady came to Africa, if not for anything but to satisfy the Thomas inside all of them, and wonders why she always chooses to appear in Europe while she was from Middle east. Obiora wonders aloud whether she was a 'political virgin'.

All these are new experiences for Kambili who always lived a quiet life, under the yock of a domineering father, who was cruel enough to punish then by torturous methods, including pouring boiled water on their feet and who had no qualms in cutting off a finger of Jaja ,when he failed to come up with the correct answer to questions set by him, based on religious themes. All these instances from the book Purple Hibiscus are excellent examples of constant clash between the traditional and modern beliefs and customs. Through some tyrannical practices perpetrated by Eugene, Kambili's father, described in the book, Adichi seems to plead and voice the indirect opinion about the need for more tolerance and compassion to be intermixed with our beliefs and there by underscore the need for balanced perspectives and an acceptance of good things of traditional beliefs.

4.CONCLUSION

Chimamanda Adichie's debut novel Purple Hibiscus is indeed about the blurred lines between the old gods and the new,the childhood and adulthood, love and hatred ie the grey spaces in which truths are revealed and true living is begun. It is as J.M. Coetzee voiced "a sensitive and touching story of a child exposed too early to religious intolerance and the uglier side of Nigerian State".It advocates the need to accept a mélange of traditional ways and new mode of living, as a solution against the conflicts that may arise between the same.

REFERENCE

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