

Identity of Childhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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ABSTRACT

The current blossoming of fiction in contemporary Nigeria is, as many critics have pointed out, creating a 'third generation' of Nigerian literature. This study argues that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, a text in this new dispensation, begins a discourse on childhood as 'a set of ideas' that engages, through alternative memory and the father figure, with what can be described as postmodern identities. Adichie's contemporaries, children spawned by literary and literal fathers, struggle with these fathers as critical memories in an attempt to delimit and transcend the symbolic boundaries carved out by identification with the father figure. In *Purple Hibiscus*, childhood equivocates its relation with this figure and problematizes it in a manner that gives this childhood power, agency to consume hybridity, third spaces. The novel is a story of the corruption and religious fundamentalism that grips Adichie's native country. Told from the point of view of a child, overt political messages are held at an arm's length, but they inform Kambili's coming of age. In spite of the corrupt military rule that comprises Nigerian politics through various characters, the importance of the woman character is brought throughout the novel.

Keywords: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; alternate memory; politics; father figure; identity; memories; *Purple Hibiscus*.

The increased output in Nigerian literature has begun to raise critical concerns. Two special editions, edited by Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton for *English in Africa* (2005) and *Research in*

African Literature (2008), have been dedicated to an emerging group of writers. These editions seek to establish 'preliminary theoretical considerations' for what they consider to be a 'third generation' of Nigerian writing. The writers have been classified using terms like 'children of Nsukka' or 'children of the anthill', echoing Abdourahaman Walberi's (1998) popular expression 'children of the postcolony'.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, one of the texts of the 'generation', reflects the beginnings of a discourse around 'children of the postcolony'. With reference to Nigeria, we are dealing here with a post-military imagination that began with the twenty-first century. *Purple hibiscus*, Adichie's first novel, is an ideal case for the study of childhood. Through the child protagonist and her memories, the text foregrounds ways in which childhood can be considered as a set of ideas in examining the underlying problem of identity. By means of memory, we are able to engage with the time of childhood experienced through its relations with the father figure.

The memory of this childhood is constructed through structures of living and feeling created by the father figure—a problematic embodiment of history and of the child's sense of identity. The decentralisation of the father figure and the quest for a multiplicity of authorities and sources of identity makes this representation of childhood amenable to postmodern consciousness, to the spirit of anti-foundationalism. Adichie, sometimes referred to as the 'daughter' of Achebe, embodies the literary child of the postcolony who is coming of age. Her sense of childhood is found at that confluence of the idea of the father, his embodiment of history and critical memory, a diasporic consciousness and a constant search to belong—found in a childhood that has already crossed the boundaries of familial, ethnic, religious and continental spaces. Like many of her contemporaries, she straddles continents and her childhood at University of Nigeria, Nsukka was peopled with various

nationalities and races. Adichie and her contemporaries occupy a 'third space' that reflects selective retrieval processes in their representation of the experience of childhood. The representation of childhood in *Purple Hibiscus* is thus informed by the experiences of movement and contact with other worlds. The evocation of childhood in the imaginations of Adichie and her contemporaries, based on their experience, is perhaps the best way of engaging with a post-military dispensation.

Purple Hibiscus is told from the point of view of its seventeenth-year-old protagonist Kambili Achike. She is the daughter of a prominent Igbo businessman, Eugene Achike, who owns factories in Enugu, Nigeria. Eugene—'Papa Eugene', as Kambili fondly calls him—also runs a newspaper called *The Standard*. Moreover, educated in England, Eugene is anglicized in belief and action. He strongly embraces the Catholic tradition, suffusing his household with its rituals and activities. His overzealous practice of Catholicism, although presented many times as stemming from a seemingly genuine contrition of spirit, ironically gives him a very sadistic and vicious side, bereft of the 'muse of forgiveness'. The novel is also politically contextualized in a period rife with the polemics of ethnicities and religions. This is because of a history of geographical and ethnic balkanization in Nigerian politics. Temporarily, her narrative of growth reconstructs memories of her childhood and reproduces some from episodic recollections. The narrative starts climatically thus: '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.' The first statement invokes a reading of *Purple Hibiscus* through the idea of memory. Explicit attention is called to the statement 'Things started to fall apart'. This is particularly so in view of the fact that the author's own life actually crosses paths with that of Chinua Achebe. Any criticism of *Purple Hibiscus* must devote significant thought to Achebe's seminal work as, in the words of Houston Baker (2001), a 'critical memory'. Kambili's account,

reconstructed at the present time when she is seventeen, is also influenced by the author's migration to the United States at the age of nineteen. Hence, the idea of childhood in *Purple Hibiscus* is informed by a diasporic consciousness. This consciousness creates a need for memories constantly to re-inscribe a sense of belonging, the desire for home that can best be found in the remembrance of the fondest and most frightening aspects of places and spaces: those landscapes of beginnings, of childhoods, of growth and mobility.

Purple Hibiscus's selective process of remembrance represents alternative memories in a time of unabashed military repression. Because of Kambili's family status these memories are also informed by a middle-class, nucleated and cloistered contact with the anomie caused by the military regime. Kambili sees the world from behind the windows of her father's car and behind 'compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires' (p.9). If for a moment we are distracted by the idea of Igbo family across Adichie's oeuvre, Kambili's memories can be considered as a third-generation product conscious of the collective memory of Biafra and its attendant ills. *Purple Hibiscus's* formulation of time follows the Catholic religious calendar, revolving around 'palm Sunday' and presenting an alternative calendar of the period 1985 to 1996 in Nigerian history, in which the text is set. Kambili's ideas of memory and time revolve around an alternative order structured by the micro-politics of memory. Her memories are of everyday agonies; an abusive father, attending church services, a school report card, the dry harmattan winds, a visit to the rural home, and estranged cousins, among others. These concerns are more central to her than the routinely publicized nationalistic concerns, as represented by the crowd chanting and waving green leaves outside government square. She says:

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones

of freedom, a different kind from the crowd waving green leaves chanted at Government square after the coup. (p.16).

Determined to be selective in her process of remembering, she continues: 'But my memories did not start at Nsukka. They started before, when all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a startling red' (p.16). Kambili presents her landscape of memory by first creating an immediate awareness of the significance of place (Nsukka) as central to this memory but she also draws attention to the symbolic nature of the red and purple hibiscus flowers in embodying what will later be the main trajectories of those memories.

Kambili yearns for the alternative and the unusual, and the purple hibiscus flowers embody this yearning, as opposed to the 'startling red' hibiscuses and her memories. In the background is a life that revolves around the church, the house, the school and the strict schedules drawn up by Papa Eugene. At school Kambili stands out as a 'backyard snob'. With the feisty, gregarious and voluble family of Auntie Ifeoma in Nsukka, she stands out as a quiet girl who speaks in a low voice all the time, as her cousin Amaka observes Kambili is an unusual child. Kambili's unusual deportment characterises the childhood space she inhabits. She occupies, alongside her recalcitrant brother Jaja, a silenced, cramped and restricted space overshadowed by a father whose relationship with them is like a stranglehold.

Childhood is a set of ideas that is important for examining alternative memories in the representation of place and space in Nigerian fiction. The figure of the father is significant in childhood as an embodiment of the equivocality of identity for the child. Yet childhood in *Purple Hibiscus* constantly engages with the 'text' of adulthood, that scripted structure of living and feeling, in an intertextual process that is inspired not only from the archive of fictional imagination but also from that of the personal childhood of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. There are

thus both literary and literal inspirations involved: from her forefathers and foremothers, from places and from spaces, even as Adichie grapples with her own transnationality, immigration and dislocation. Childhood in *Purple Hibiscus* is a painstaking foray into the inevitabilities of the postmodern identities that Adichie and her contemporaries are currently experiencing and which perhaps, through their entry-point of childhood, distinguish theirs as a nascent zeitgeist in Nigeria's post-military dispensation.

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