

PARADOX OF PATRIARCHY IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*: MAKING A CASE FOR PARADIGMATIC SHIFT

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Abstract

*Men have for long been entrusted with power in many cultures of the world. It is not surprising therefore that men dominate the politics and business of most nations of the world. The notion that men are superior and can therefore make better decisions as to how a social institution – such as families, religious institutions, government etcetera – should be run explains why the exercise of power is widely regarded as an exclusive preserve of men. In refuting this age-long held notion, Chimamanda Adichie in her *Purple Hibiscus* satirizes the (mis)use of power by patriarchal figures (men) and shows the cataclysmic effects of such abuse of power. In making a case for gender equality in all things, including the right to participate in decision making at all levels of government, Adichie juxtaposes two families: one ruled by a phallocentric figure (Papa Eugene) and another led by a feminist university lecturer (Aunty Ifeoma). The catastrophic end of Papa Eugene and the disaster he brings upon his dependants are juxtaposed with the success Aunty Ifeoma achieves, even though she had to manage her family with a meagre income as the universities were starved of fund by the military-led-government of the day –*

headed by a man. The paper employs Postcolonial Feminist Theory to examine the paradox of Patriarchy in *Purple Hibiscus*. It finds that Patriarchy has produced results that are below expectation, hence the need for a paradigm shift. Auntie Ifeoma symbolizes the new paradigm.

Key Word: Paradox, Patriarchy, Power, Paradigm shift, Postcolonial.

Introduction

A feminist voice from a patriarchal society like Nigeria is most likely to draw the attention of her audience to the counter productivity of the use or misuse of power by men at both the domestic sphere and public space. Expectedly, Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* echoes the abuse of power by both Papa Eugene, within the household level and the military head of state at the national level. The exercise of power by these patriarchal figures culminates not only in creating a loud silence that could be "heard" within their respective territories but also brings the self-destruction manifested in the circumstances surrounding their sudden exit. The leadership style of these men, whom the society gives the sole right to lead, produces negative results that are contrary to their expectation – and perhaps the general expectations – hence this topic, "Paradox of Patriarchy in *Purple Hibiscus*: Making a Case for a Paradigm Shift."

In the novel, Papa Eugene exercises absolute power within his household. His words are law and must not be questioned. Every member of the household is expected to religiously abide by the rules he sets without asking questions. Any attempt by any member of the family to present a contrary view or deviate from the standard he sets is visited with severe physical and mental torture, aimed at

not only forcing the subjects into submission but also to serve as deterrence to others. His wealth plays a very important role in sustaining his firm control of the behaviour of the other members of his family.

The family members have every material thing that ordinarily should make them happy yet they lack the basic and fundamental ingredients of happiness, namely freedom and self-confidence. They have no access to information other than the one Papa Eugene approves of. They are denied the fundamental human right of freedom of thought; Eugene does the thinking for them. They are only expected to follow the schedule he has thought out and penciled down for them. Papa Eugene in his phallogocentric reasoning fears that his children might become irresponsible if they are given the freedom to make decision on how to use their time. It is paradoxical therefore that the decision he made produced undesirable behaviour in his children; they are more or less, social misfits. One would expect that the children would be role models since they do things “the right way” by following Papa Eugene’s dictates.

Chimamanda Adichie as a feminist writer is concerned about the abuse of power by men. She is not alone in this. A number of African writers, especially female writers have lent their voices towards x-raying the negative effects of the perpetuation of certain cultural practices that have their roots in Patriarchal doctrines. Safiya Yero is of the opinion that,

It is impossible to discuss African literature without talking about patriarchy. African women pay attention to the ways that patriarchy – that is, the psychological and political system that values the male higher than the female – use laws,

traditions, force, ritual, customs, education, language, labour (etc.) to keep women governed by men in both public and private life. African women have been silenced for too long about the crimes of traditional patriarchy such as the abusive and dehumanizing institution of patriarchal polygamy, widow abuse, genital cutting, witch-hunting and women's lack of access to property and power in traditional society. (122)

Eugene is confident that he has successfully blocked all openings through which a contrary view or idea could enter into his well-secured home and subsequently into the minds of the members of his household. He therefore, carries on his daily affairs without the fear of any possible revolt. Perhaps, he would have continued his control of the family for a longer time if he had not acceded to Auntie Ifeoma's request – or demand as it appeared – for Jaja and Kambili to spend the remaining part of the Christmas holidays with her family in Nsukka. Like Papa Eugene, the military head of state uses state security agencies to silence opposition to ensure that those trying to prevent him from realizing his goals are brought to their knees. For Eugene, his high "... compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires" (Adichie 9) and the drawing of the timetable for Kambili and Jaja are some of the tools for limiting their access to contrary information. His ultimate goal is to raise children who will be like him, children who will do things the 'right' way, the way the Whites do things. The readers learn that: "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.24). With their daily routine so spelt out in the schedules, Eugene probably would have succeeded in preventing his children from rebelling against his tyranny, as they have no time to think outside the box; but Auntie Ifeoma foils his plan by exposing the children to a different way of life. Eugene is confident that his children will remain obedient to him even while they spend the holiday with their auntie in Nsukka. He has no reason to fear that they could abandon the schedules he gives each of them before they left for Nsukka. If he had any reason to think the children will follow any other instruction contrary to his own, he would have probably refused to allow the children spend the holiday outside his home.

The military head of state on his part controls the mass media to ensure that no information get to his subjects, especially the poor masses, except those that he approves of. Ade Coker is killed for giving the citizens access to information that the military head of state did not approve. It does not matter that the report contained nothing but the truth. Their control of information helped in keeping their subjects docile for a considerable period of time. But the rebellion they feared eventually came and took away not only their powers but also their lives.

Operational Definition of Terms

Paradox is a literary term that describes a deliberate use of seeming self-contradictory statement to convey a hidden truth. Murundu in her *Paradox of Power in Yvonne Vera's Novels* traces the etymological background of the term Paradox:

Paradox is derived from a Greek word — paradoxon which means contrary to expectations, existing beliefs or perceived opinion. It is a

statement that appears to be self-contradictory but which includes some latent truths. Sometimes scholars use the paradox concept to illustrate an opinion that is contrary to the expected traditional ideas to make their readers think innovatively. In literature, the word paradox is defined as an anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas for the sake of striking exposition or unexpected insight. (Murundu)

Paradox is used in the context of this paper to mean “contrary to expectations, existing beliefs or perceived opinion.” The authors consider the results of Patriarchy as depicted in *Purple Hibiscus* as paradoxical because they negate or run contrary to the general expectations. Also, we consider the above definition appropriate because Adichie’s depiction of the male characters as failed leaders is contrary to the existing belief that men lead better than women. It is rather paradoxical that men (Papa Eugene and the Military Head of State) who reserved the exclusive right to lead in patriarchal society failed where a woman (Aunty Ifeoma) succeeded.

Patriarchy as used in the context of this study simply means male dominance, particularly as it relates to control of socio-political institutions. In this sense it does not matter if the particular man is named officially as the head of the particular entity. What matters is that his decision is final and not open to debate or questioning. The man who wields enormous power within a household or a state is a patriarch. Power denotes the use of force or influence to control the will of other people in a social milieu. Power is an integral part of Patriarchy. In his *Sociology of Religion*, Marx Weber describes power as a basic force in social relationships or the ability of an individual or group to achieve their own goals or

aims when others are trying to prevent them from realizing them. (Weber qtd in Murundu). The definition above gives us the inference that the exercise of power inevitably induces conflict between the individual or group intending to achieve their aim/goal and the other group who are trying to prevent them from realizing them.

The paradoxical situation that served as the motivation for this study is the unexpected manner in which the patriarchal figures, namely, Papa Eugene and the Military head of state die suddenly as described in the novel. A critical reader might foresee that it is not unlikely that the duo would meet their waterloo sooner or later following their merciless application of force on their helpless subjects. But these men failed to read the hand writing on the wall. They are fixated on achieving their goals that they ignored the warning signs that were in place before death struck them at a time they least expected it. The paradox of Patriarchy is also evident in the manner in which the powerful men are destroyed/killed by the weak women in the novel. The author subtly refutes the notion of the superiority of men by painting a contradictory situation where the weak destroys the powerful.

Their sudden death is remarkable as it is didactic. Remarkable because it marked not just the end of their lives but also the end of the road to the realization of their aims, implying that the power they wield and exercise, produced a result that negates or contradicts their aims. The author perhaps painted the circumstances surrounding their death thus to pass a strong message to all oppressors who delight in inflicting pains on people they are supposed to protect. The moral lesson from the death of the oppressors is that the oppressed will eventually find a way to eliminate their oppressor regardless of how powerful the latter is.

The novel is a didactic novel because the two oppressors ended woefully thereby suggesting that sudden painful death awaits people who oppress others.

Paradigm Shift denotes a significant change from a position or state of affairs in a socio-political milieu. It is an important change that happens when the usual way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way or when a thesis is confronted by an anti-thesis hence the resultant synthesis.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs the Postcolonial Feminist Theory. The Postcolonial Feminism is a variant of the mainstream Western Feminism which became prominent in the 1990s following the works of Angela Davis, Chandra Talpade among other Third World Feminist writers. Quoting Ngugi, 1986 and Cesaire, 2000, Musa Dube posits:

Postcolonial feminist framework, as used here, seeks to analyze how the history of colonial contact zones continues to be lived out in the narrative of *Purple Hibiscus*, paying attention to voices of resistance, collaboration and mimicry to the forces of colonialism and its legacies as well as assessing the its intersectionality of race, gender and class (Bhabha, 1994; Nicholls, 2010). As used here, colonialism, therefore, does not only refer to the domination of the land or the occupying of the physical or geographical space of the other by dominating super powers and their allies. It also refers to the occupation of the cultural, spiritual and psychological space of the

other, which outlives the historical event (Dube 225).

Effiok B Uwatt on his part comments on what he called “the obvious distinction between the Western and African feminism” and posits that, ‘African feminism, in contrast is accommodating in the sense of including both men and children in its feminist ideals.’(Uwatt 2)

Writers such as Spivak have also clarified that feminism should not be equated with man-hating. (Spivakqtd in Yero 121). It is not surprising therefore, that in *Purple Hibiscus* Auntie Ifeoma who symbolizes Adichie’s ideal feminist figure fights for the liberation of both men (Papa Nnukwu and Jaja) and women (Kambili and Mama Beatrice) from the grip of Papa Eugene. The tenets of Postcolonial Feminism include among other things, subalternity, reflexivity and representation. Reflecting on representation in the context of Postcolonial Feminism discourse, Ritu Tyagi succinctly describes the challenges that gave rise to Postcolonial Feminism in the following words:

Postcolonial feminist theory is primarily concerned with the representation of women in once colonized countries and in western locations. While postcolonial theorist struggles against the maiden colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting him as inferior, the task of a postcolonial feminist is far more complicated. She suffers from “double colonization” as she simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. She has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject, but also as a woman. In this oppression, her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice, but her oppressor. In his struggle against the colonizer, he even

exploits her by misrepresenting her in the nationalist discourses. Not only that, she also suffers at the hand of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts by imposing silence on their racial, cultural, social, and political specificities, and in so doing, act as potential oppressors of their “sisters”. (Tyagi 46)

The Current State of Affairs.

From the very opening of the novel, the reader sees how the bitter fruit of conflict arising from repressive use of power rears its ugly head in Papa Eugene’s home. Papa Eugene, a patriarchal religious extremist is determined to use any means possible to get his family members to live according to the standard he set for them. The high fence and the security wire that surround the house in which the family lives are metaphors for restriction and seclusion. The walls and wires are symbolic as they restrict the entrance of intruders as well as new ideas, beliefs or thoughts into the compound. Information is power. Papa Eugene knows this hence; he allows the members of the family no breathing space even though the “... yard is wide enough to hold a hundred people dancing *atilogu*, spacious enough for each dancer to do the usual somersaults and land on the next dancer’s shoulders.” (9). All means by which the members of the family will have access to any information outside the one he approves of are blocked. He does not allow his father Achike (aka Papa-Nnukwu) to come into his house. This is to ensure that the children do not come in contact with information about the African Traditional Religion (ATR) system of belief and worship. He literally threw Anikwenwa, his father’s age mate, out of his

compound in his determination to control the information that flows into his home.

The entire narrative of *Purple Hibiscus*, viewed from Postcolonial Feminist perspective is a rejection of the superiority that is often assigned to the male gender. Men exercise power as heads of families, natural rulers, religious and political leaders. In doing so, they dominate the affairs at home and in public places; compelling other members of the society to comply with whatever directive they give from their exalted seats. Yet their leadership styles have produced negative results contrary to the general belief that men make better leaders. For example, in Nigeria where *Purple Hibiscus* is set, we are told that,

Since the return of democracy in 1999, the Senate has been dominated by males. In 1999 there were only 3 women out of the 109 members representing 2.8 per cent of the members of the Senate. In 2007 the number increased to 8 (7.3 per cent). However, there was a decrease from 8 women ... in 2007 to 7 in 2011 which is 6.4 per cent and 8 (7.3 per cent) in 2015. (Oluyemi 7).

One would expect that the country would witness significant progress since power is in the hand of men. But the reverse is the case. The executive arm of the government and the Judiciary are equally dominated by men. The men are expected to represent the interests of the women since the women – here considered as subaltern that cannot speak for themselves – are not supposed to participate in active politics or major decision making. The juxtaposition of the Family ruled by Papa Eugene on one hand and another one led by Auntie Ifeoma on the other hand, is perhaps the author's way of questioning the notion that men are better leaders or decision makers.

“The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government.” (1999 Constitution). The male dominated military government is portrayed as one which has failed to fulfil this primary purpose. The university in Nsukka, lacks such basic social amenities as light and water because the “Big Man in Abuja has stolen the money” (131). The author seems to argue that if truly men were better leaders, they would not steal public funds meant for human capital and infrastructural development.

Again we are told that the Military Head of state died “atop a prostitute, foaming in the mouth and jerking.” (289). Here the reader gets to know that the stolen public fund is spent on self-gratification and frivolities. In other word, the leader wastes national resources in self-gratification with prostitutes, while his subjects (the students, lecturers and other citizens) wallow in the cesspit of poverty. This is contrary to what is expected of a good leader. It is interesting to note that while the Head of State is wasting the nation’s resources, Auntie Ifeoma is using the little resource at her disposal to cater for her family, including Papa Nnukwu whom Eugene had abandoned. This questions the existing belief that men are better managers of resources.

In rejecting the notion of male gender as super humans and women as “other” or subaltern who are incapable of making wise decision, the author portrays the Military Head of state as a wasteful and thoughtless leader. His character contrasts sharply with that of Auntie Ifeoma who used the little resources at her disposal to run a family. Members of Auntie Ifeoma’s family are freer and happier than members of Eugene’s family even though the latter family is richer.

The author also portrays men as egocentric and hardhearted. Papa Eugene’s house is the second biggest in Abba, second only to Chief

Umeadi's house (90). Yet his father (Papa-Nnukwu) lives in a small dirty house in the same community. He would not allow the old man into his house because he (Papa-Nnukwu) refused to convert to Christianity. On the other hand, the author portrays women as tolerant and caring beings. Auntie Ifeoma accommodates her father (Papa-Nnukwu) when Eugene abandoned him in Abba. She did not force her daughter (Amaka) to choose from the English names which Father Amadi presented for Confirmation even though she is irritated by Amaka's argument.

Unlike Auntie Ifeoma, the egocentric Parish priest of Abba is not bothered by the fact that Eugene abandoned his sick father in the village. Perhaps, he like Eugene's kinsmen (*Umunna*) and other residents of Abba is afraid to confront Eugene on the subject. Auntie Ifeoma rightly notes: "everybody in Abba, will tell Eugene only what he wants to hear. Do our people not have sense? Will you pinch the finger of the hand that feeds you?" (96). This is most likely the same reason why Father Benedict chooses to play along with Eugene while ignoring the suffering of Mama, Jaja and Kambili whose welfare are supposed to be part of his concerns. Perhaps, the situation would have been different if women were given the chance to be Parish Priests.

The New Paradigm

Auntie Ifeoma is portrayed as an ideal Feminist capable of changing the narrative if given equal opportunity as her male counterparts. However, the odds against her are numerous and weighty. First, she is a woman and in the society where she lives, being a woman is a challenge ipso facto. Her aged and sick father tells her that, "you are a woman, you do not count" (P.83). Yet she

is the one that caters for the old man after Papa Eugene abandoned him for refusing to convert to Christianity.

Apart from the general challenges facing women in her society, Auntie Ifeoma had specific challenges to contend with as she makes her way up the ladder. The accident that resulted in the sudden death of her husband, Ifediora (P.74) is a major setback to her journey to success. The burden of widowhood following the accident is compounded by the unfair treatment she receives from her late husband's family members. They even accused her of masterminding the death of their brother. Yet she remains focused, trying hard to meet the basic needs of her children at a time that the country is going through unprecedented hardship. The author portrays her as a resilient and prudent leader. These qualities enable her to maintain a happy family even in the face of hardship resulting from the mismanagement of the nation's resources by the then military government.

Comparing the situations in Auntie Ifeoma's home and that of Papa Eugene, Kambili notes that in the former's home, "food had little meat, each person's piece the width of two fingers pressed close together and the length of half a finger" (P.139). Yet we are told that, "laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma's house" (139) while silence reigns supreme in Papa Eugene's house. In other words, Auntie Ifeoma as a leader (head of the family) is able to make her subjects happy even though they live in poor condition. Her leadership qualities, namely, love, prudence and resilience make that possible. The new paradigm would therefore allow women who possess these qualities access to power. The citizens, just like Auntie Ifeoma's children will be happy and free.

The old paradigm favours the use of repression to silence opposition. The patriarchal figures in the novel like Papa Eugene

and the military head of state do not tolerate opposition. Hence, Papa Eugene attacked Jaja when the later refused to go for Holy Communion. A critical reader is able to notice the manner in which the author juxtaposes Papa Eugene's reaction to Jaja's rebellion (P.7) and Auntie Ifeoma's reaction to Amaka's rejection of English name (266). The author reports the encounter between Auntie Ifeoma and her daughter Amaka in the following words:

Auntie Ifeoma looked up from the forms she was going through." Amaka, *ngwa*, pick a name and let Father Amadi go and do his work." "But what is the point then," Amaka said to Father Amadi as if she had not heard her mother. "What the church is saying is that only an English name will make your confirmation valid. 'Chiamaka' says God is beautiful. 'Chima' says God knows best, 'Chiebuka' says God is the greatest. Don't they all glorify God as much as 'Paul' and 'Peter' and 'Simon'?" Auntie Ifeoma was getting annoyed; I knew by her raised voice, by her snappy tone..."you don't have to prove a senseless point here! Just do it and get confirmed, nobody says you have to use the name!" But Amaka refused. (P.266)

To worsen the situation, Amaka "walked in her room and turned her music on very loud until Auntie Ifeoma knocked on the door and shouted that Amaka was asking for a slap if she did not turn it down right away" (P.266). In the two scenes compared above, Jaja and Amaka – both of whom represent opposing voices – respectively act rudely in presenting their dissenting views. Amaka even walked out on her mother and Father Amadi. However, Papa

Eugene's violent reaction (a major element of patriarchy) contrasts with Auntie Ifeoma non-violent (Postcolonial Feminist) approach to similar situation. This is probably a call from the author for a shift from the use of violent force to silence opposition, the old way, to a new paradigm that would tolerate opposition as Auntie Ifeoma exemplifies.

The new paradigm will also entrench equal opportunities for both gender and will not punish people who speak out against injustice. It will jettison the practice of rewarding or favouring a corrupt civil servant like "Okafor who lives on Fulton Avenue" (238). Okafor symbolizes the rot in the university system in the country. He will not speak against the wrong things happening within the university. He can do anything to please the elite, particularly those who live and run the affairs of the state from the FCT, Abuja. Instead of punishing such corrupt lecturers, the patriarchal system favours them. For example, we read that Okafor is the one that makes the list of Lecturers that are disloyal. People like Auntie Chiaku who speaks against the wrong decisions of the university management or those of the military government are listed as disloyal lecturers. Auntie Ifeoma receives a termination letter for what the university management called illegal activity. (255). Speaking against injustice is seen as illegal activity in the old system. There is therefore the need for change.

Conclusion

This paper highlighted the weaknesses of patriarchy, especially as it relates to the exercise of power by men to the exclusion of women. The above discussion on the roles and characters of Papa Eugene, the Parish Priests and the Military Head of State among other male characters has reveals the danger of

Patriarchy – leaving the power of decision making to men alone. The old paradigm represented by the patriarchal figures in *purple Hibiscus* has proved inefficient. The author has shown that the existing belief that women are incapable of providing good leadership is a wrong notion. The men through their various styles of leadership have given us results that are below expectations, hence the need for a paradigm shift. Auntie Ifeoma symbolizes a woman that is capable of providing good leadership. She is the new paradigm hence the recommended order.

Through her, the author has shown that women are capable of providing quality leadership, one which has the security and welfare of the subjects as its primary purpose. The author demonstrates this by imbuing Auntie Ifeoma with desirable leadership qualities. She is able to maintain a family that is happy in the midst of the hardship arising from the mismanagement of the nation's resources by the military government of the day. If she could run a home with little income during that period of hardship, she could run a nation if given the opportunity to do so. It is on the basis of this, that this paper calls for a paradigm shift in the constitution of government at both private and public sphere in the country and the world at large.

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