

## **Chronotope and Identity Crisis in the Nigerian Novel: An *Other* Reading of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the impact of the spatial and temporal dimensions on identity formation and development in the main character in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The craft of literary criticism springs from the common assumption that a literary text is a site of plurisignification. Consequently, literary praxis, from Aristotle till date, has inhaled in the extraction of meanings from prose, drama and poetry texts in the belief that fiction being a mimesis of life must needs assist man to understand himself and the world he inhabits. Thus, characters in fiction attract special attention in literary criticism because, as Alexander Pope avers, the proper study of mankind is man. Although many studies abound on characters and characterisations in the novel, it is rare to find a study on the salubrious or deleterious influences of the spatio-temporal dimension in a work of art on identity formation in a fictive personage. The thesis of this study is that the variables of space and time substantially but subliminally contribute to the formation of a character's perception of individuality, and the self-image he/she projects to the world. Further, the study hypothesises that if the variables of space and time are changed in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the identity of the main character in the novel will undergo startling transformations despite his inherited genetic codes.

### **Introduction**

It is customary in engaging with literary texts to analyse the thematic, separately, or in conjunction with such artificial categories as the setting, characters/characterisation, narrative technique and language. These planes of critical praxis are artificial because novels

constitute an undivided reading experience, “organic wholes” (Philip Stevick 9-10); one united entity striking the human sensibilities at all perceptive points at once and not packets of disjointed stimuli hitting the reader separately and sequentially. Consequently, the critic must constantly remind himself that the reader perceives the text as an indivisible signifier who’s signified is multi-faceted and simultaneous. The following criticism of Adichie’s magnum opus strives to avoid this booby trap by essaying an “inclusive” or “wholesome” criticism demonstrating how different aspects of the text vivify the thematics even though the primary objective of the paper is to explore how the spatio-temporal dimension of the text impacts strongly on the psyche of the main character, fostering in him an identity crisis which shapes his personality in ways so subliminal they are often passed over unnoticed. This is the main way this study is an *other* reading, as distinct from just “another” reading of the text. It is also unconventional because it admits insights from historical times by relating the work to the society that produces it historically and the time loci of the pseudo-author and the characters in the text (A. A. Mendilow 258-262). To do this effectively, the paper adopts Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope.

In “Forms of Time “ in the Novel.”Bakhtin says:  
We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.... it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)..... The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic. (84-85)

Even though Bakhtin applies the chronotope specifically to the analysis of language in literature, in this paper the scope is widened to include the analytical category known as setting in literary analysis. Hence, in subsequent paragraphs, we shall talk about the early life chronotope, the religious chronotope, the home chronotope, the

socio-political chronotope etc as they relate to the identity crisis in the main character in *Purple Hibiscus*. Besides Bakhtin, Ian Watts also emphasises the imbrications of the environment in identity development in characters when he asserts that:

...the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and to the detailed presentation of their environment. (19)

The difference between Watts and Bakhtin is that the former represents the conventional attitude of critics to setting, while the latter represents the more revolutionary approach to the spatio-temporal dimension in the novel.

Another unconventional approach adopted in this paper is that it extends Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope to cover the human context which often charges the time-space medium with greater vibrancy than the establishment of historical specificity, atmosphere or mood associated with physical setting. As W. J. Harvey asserts, "this social setting is one of the most important of all human contexts..." (236). In essence, mere locale and time will not suffice to define a character's identity; his interactions with other characters in that chronotope will contribute tremendously to the continual shaping or reformulation of the identity of the character. So, the paper will make reference to other characters in the text whose actions and inactions help to define the personality of the main character.

### **Characters, identity and identity crisis**

Characters are the people we encounter in fiction, male, female, children, adults, rich or poor, who through their actions and interactions help the author to dramatise his humanistic concerns; they are the living messages of the author. Abrams notes that to make these characters real to the reader, the author ascribes to them motives, passions, strengths and weaknesses like real human persons

(20). On his part, E. M. Forster calls characters *homo fictus* (41), adding that they are like us because they possess the five main facts in human life: "birth, food, sleep, love and death" (36). They are, however, different from real human beings because we can know everything about *homo fictus* but it is impossible to know everything about *homo sapiens* (41). Characters, then, are the literary equivalents of people in society, and a character's personal identity is, in a way, his/her own perception of self and the self-image he/she projects to and is perceived by fellow human beings. Developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson corroborates this notion of identity when he says that personal identity is defined by both self and the community and the process is dynamic and continues throughout an individual's life (732).

Erikson uses the term identity crisis to describe a period of confusion, when the individual is conflicted about feelings of personal identity and confused about the role(s) that society expects him/her to play in the life of the community. James Marcia believes that refusal or inability to commit to an identity status with its obligatory roles and expectations usually triggers this crisis. Marcia consequently develops a hierarchy of identity statuses which indicates degrees of commitment to an identity: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement (*Encyclopedia of Adolescence vol. 1*). Identity diffusion is a stage of identity crisis in which the individual refuses to explore and commit himself to any role in the society. Such a person could end up being schizophrenic and depressive. Identity foreclosure is another stage of identity crisis when an individual who has committed to an identity chosen for him, for example by his/her parents, is suddenly shaken from his previous beliefs. An adolescent who suddenly discovers another religion or ethical belief different from the one he was born into and has accepted as the norm may exhibit such a crisis. Identity moratorium is another stage of identity crisis and describes a person who explores many choices but does not commit to any of them.

Finally, identity achievement describes an individual who makes choices and commits to them. Of the four statuses enumerated above, a person at the stage of moratorium is undergoing the most volatile and serious identity crisis. He is the most conflicted, neither accepting himself or herself as she/he is nor committing to the way the world sees him. In other words, there is non-alignment between who she/he perceives himself/herself to be and the self-image he projects to the world. The ensuing confusion is often self- and other-destructive. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, the main characters fall into one or the other of Marcia's identity statuses. The thesis of this paper is that the chronotope operative at different stages in the life of different characters in the novel impels each character towards an identity status with its concomitant reverberations on self and society.

### **Eugene Achike**

Eugene is simultaneously the most colourful and the most conflicted character in Adichie's novel. Adichie uses this character to condemn domestic violence, dictatorship, religious bigotry, the dehumanising effect inordinate desire for mammon, the absence of love and so many other themes. We first encounter Eugene at the moratorium stage of identity, and by the time the author kills him off he never graduates from the stage of confusion. An in-depth analysis of a few chronotopes associated with Eugene highlights the centrifugal and centripetal forces that make Eugene the human bomb that he is in the novel. It must be noted, however, that one of the drawbacks of the author's adoption of the first person narrative technique is that the narrator is incapable of giving us insights into the thought-life and mind of fellow characters in the novel. In the case of Kambili, the participant-narrator of *Purple Hibiscus*, she is unable to tell us much about the inner life, the drives motivating the actions of her parents and brother, their background or growing-up years, their fears and aspirations and, in regards to her parents, the intimacy, quarrels and beatings that go on behind the closed doors of her parents' gilded and ornate bedroom. It is hoped that the unconventional approach of this paper will resolve some of the intriguing weirdness perceptible in Eugene

In the literature, Eugene has attracted more vitriol than praise from critics. In their separate papers on the text, Niyi Osunbade and Anthony C. Oha highlight the intriguing schizophrenia in Eugene's personality. For example, Oha describes Eugene as "...a man who decries anarchy in the society while he consciously practices the same ill within his homestead. ...He expects freedom but blocks it from his vicinity," (202). To Ogaga Okuyade, Eugene is "a religious maverick" (247); Femi Eromosele describes him as "callous" (100); while Gloria Ada Fwanyil says he is a patriarchal monster who covers up his child abuse, filial neglect and wife battery by his veneer of religious fanaticism (264-265). Francis M. Ganyi says Eugene is "an extremist Catholic Fundamentalist Patriarch whose word is Law" (2), and Sophia O. Ogwude adds in the same vein that "Eugene is presented as a social and financially successful but fatally flawed personality" (115). One of the few critics who describe Eugene in some positive way is Andre Kabore who avers that Eugene is "a victorious martyr" (33).

None of the works reviewed above examined the impact of the environment on the development of identity in the characters in the novel which is our main project in this work. However, two papers tangentially discuss the role of the environment in *Purple Hibiscus* without analysing the link between chronotope and identity crisis in Eugene. The first is Ayo Kehinde's "Rulers against Writers, Writers against Rulers: The Failed Promise of the Public Sphere in Postcolonial Nigerian Fiction" in which he describes Eugene as "intolerant" and "a tyrant" (43). Kehinde's paper infers that the coercion, oppression and abuse of human rights characteristic of military dictatorship in the Nigerian socio-political space contributed to the moulding of Eugene into the monster he is in the narrative: "Papa Eugene is conceived as a nation's tyrant ruler; his household is a metonymy of the nation and his family signify the dehumanized citizens of the nation" (43).

The second paper is Dare Owolabi and Omolara Kikelomo Owoeye's "Globalization and Nigeria's Socio-Political Landscape in the Novels of

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie” which also explores the impact of the environment on the themes and characters in the novel, but departs from the thrust of this study in its lack of focus on the chronotopic influences of the environment on identity crisis and character development in *Purple Hibiscus*. All these works analyse the characters in *Purple Hibiscus* without focusing on the salubrious or deleterious effects of different chronotopes on the identity crisis in Papa Eugene as this paper henceforth proceeds to do by scrutinising different choronotopes which cumulatively crystalise Eugene’s schizophrenic personal identity.

The home or family chronotope refers to the background and immediate family time-space dimension of each character. For Eugene, his growing-up years are shrouded in some mystery due to the limitations of the participant-narrator. Thus we get to know his background by inference rather than by reference. For instance, we can only infer that Eugene and his sister, Ifeoma, grew up in a poverty-ravaged home space. We get to know this many decades after the birth of Eugene when his children, Jaja and Kambili, go to pay their annual fifteen-minute visit to their grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. Kambili says her grandfather’s house is in a “thatch-enclosed compound” (71). Its “wooden” gate is “creaking” and “narrow”. The building itself is small and “looked just like the pictures of houses I used to draw in kindergarten: a square house with a square door at the centre and two square windows on each side” (71). The veranda is bounded by “rusty metal bars; and the house has no bathroom but an “outhouse”, a closet-size building of unpainted cement blocks with a mat of entwined palm-fronds pulled across the gaping entrance” (71).

We can infer that this has been how the home-space of Eugene and Ifeoma has been for a long time, no thanks to the uncharitable brand of Christianity that Eugene demonstrates towards his father. To accentuate the poverty of Eugene’s father’s home-space, the narrator says the whole of his father’s compound is just about a quarter of their compound in Enugu. And in the previous page, the narrator contrasts Papa Nnukwu’s poor dwelling place with the magnificence

and splendour of Eugene's mansion in the village which is only a five-minute walk down the road with its "gleaming white walls and pillars...the perfect silver-coloured water arch the fountain made" (70). It is a multi-story building with a "large living room" (70), dining room, kitchen and bedrooms with all modern facilities provided. Ironically, even though his son's mansion is close by, Papa-Nnukwu is forbidden from stepping into the compound because he refuses to convert to Christianity.

To fully appreciate the import of the depressing locale described above, it is important to consider a few time-loci in relation to the story. The time-locus of the writer of this fiction is about 2006 in Nigeria which was the date of publication of the work. At that time, President Olusegun Obasanjo, a democratically elected leader, was rounding off his second term in office. The time-locus of the narrator, Kambili is between 1986 and 1998 judging by some historical allusions in the work, which means that the military were in power at the time, General Ibrahim Babangida and late General Sani Abacha. Specifically, the assassination of Ade Coker the editor of *The Standard* occurs under the same circumstances as that of Dele Giwa, editor-in-chief of *Newswatch* in 1986 in Lagos, Nigeria. The historical Dele Giwa and the fictional Ade Coker were assassinated by letter bombs delivered to them while having breakfast with their families (212).

Also, the incendiary missives that despatched both to the great beyond purportedly bore the seal of the State House (212). Historically, these events happened to Dele Giwa during the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida (1986-1993). Babangida also was the first and only Nigerian military leader till date who refused to call himself a Head of State, but a "military president". This title is found in the novel where Eugene derides the new military leader as another power-hungry adventurer (33). So the description of Papa-Nnukwu's house is, historically, as of the Babangida era. Consequently, the reader must undertake a mental regression to place the old man's modest dwelling as it must have stood in the last years of the colonial epoch in Nigeria when Eugene and Ifeoma must have been youngsters in their home town, Abba.



There is no specific reference to the ages of Eugene and Ifeoma in the narrative, but calculating by the fact of Ifeoma's possession of a doctorate degree and the fact that it takes a long time to realise such a goal in Nigeria in-between which she still got married, had two teenage children and became a widow, she could not have been less than forty years of age when we meet her in the narrative. And being older, Eugene must have been in his late forties. Assuming he is forty-five years of age and his time-locus is 1986 when General Babangida toppled the regime of his former boss, General Muhammadu Buhari, we can fix his birth year at about 1940. Since there is no reference to the fact that Eugene built his father's house for him, it stands to reason that the house must have been built before the independence of Nigeria in 1960 because the narrator observes "it was hard to imagine Papa and Auntie Ifeoma growing up here!" (71). But they did, and during the colonial period too. As at 1986, the historical Aba town in Nigeria was already a big and bustling city famous nationwide for the variety of its markets. It already had modern buildings all over the place, although palatial edifices like that of Eugene may not be common. At the same time, oddities like the house of Papa Nnukwu were not uncommon as well. The essence of this chronotope is that it highlights the poor background from which Eugene and Ifeoma emerged, growing up as second class citizens during the colonial era. The relevance of all this is that the poverty of his dwelling place is a reflection of how the psyche of his children must have been deeply affected by the poverty prevalent in their growing up years.

Under colonialism, the subjects are regarded as second class citizens, the first class citizens being the colonial officers, the whites, who wielded political and economic powers. Consequently, the environment in which Eugene and Ifeoma grew up must have bred in them the feeling that they are second class citizens in their own country. They also suffered a double yoke in the environment, the yoke of coming from a poor colonial family. Ifeoma could be said to have suffered a third yoke as well; the yoke of being a female in a largely patriarchal colonial society. Like all citizens under colonial

subjugation, the two characters must have had an inferiority complex subconsciously bred in them by the domineering and impoverishing colonial power (Britain) then in control of their destinies as Nigerians. The chronotope of their early years thus indicates an environment of physical, political, economic and psychological oppression and abject poverty. There are two psychological responses to oppression and poverty: outright rebellion and/or accommodation and exploitation. In other words, some colonial subjects may regard the oppressor as the enemy to be resisted with the last drop of blood in their veins, while others actually admire and try to emulate him. In Eugene, however, we observe both responses: outright rebellion and a fawning admiration of the white man, especially the old-type white Catholic priests. To him, therefore, the white man is both Satan and Saviour.

Eugene's rebellion against oppression, especially overt political and physical oppression remained repressed in his unconscious all through his growing up years despite the fact that the first twenty years of his life must have been spent under the harsh de-humanising environment of direct colonialism. But a critical study of the chronotope of his adult life (the post-independence era) demonstrates active resistance to oppression. By the time we meet Eugene in chapter one of the novel, the young democratic experiment in Nigeria has been overthrown – it lasted only six years – and a succession of military coups has rendered the nation comatose. Even though the military struck ostensibly because of the corruption of the political class, they end up creating a worse environment than did the politicians they overthrew, an environment where corruption reigned supreme and barefaced abuse of human rights became the order of the day. Having lived under the oppressive regime of the colonialists, the corruption of the nascent civilian regime and the more suffocating oppression and corruption of subsequent military regimes in Nigeria rouses the latent anger in Eugene and he became a defender of the common man's rights. Eugene, therefore, uses his newspaper, *The Standard*, to fight the oppression, poverty and abuse of human rights that characterised the military era in Nigerian history (33).

Eugene as well as Ifeoma also rebels against poverty. Being intelligent children, Eugene and Ifeoma must have realised quite early in life that the surest way to disentangle themselves from the thorns of poverty is to embrace Western education. This brings the two characters into the orbit of the missionaries, the purveyors of western education during the colonial era in Nigeria. Eugene and Ifeoma went to mission schools, but Eugene was taken directly under the tutelage of the Catholic fathers. That began the process of his alienation from his African cultural roots. Hence, his father's well-justified lament later in life: "My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. *I should not have let him follow those missionaries*" (91, emphasis is mine).

Although Ifeoma tries to take the sting off Papa-Nnukwu's words by reminding him that she too went to a mission school and still remains rooted in her Nigerian culture, her father insists: "Still it was the missionaries that misled my son" (91). The truth remains that while Ifeoma embraces Catholicism along with Western education, she manages not to lose respect for her African culture. But her brother, who lived with the white fathers at St. Gregory's Grammar School, Lagos in the years leading up to the Nigerian independence became deeply indoctrinated with Catholicism. He was also deeply grateful to the Catholic fathers to the point of blind loyalty for giving him education which saved him from a life of inexorable poverty and degradation. Thus, he sees everything African as primitive. For example, he rarely speaks Igbo, his mother tongue, and bans his children from speaking it even at home. He also castigates the young Father Amadi, a Nigerian, for breaking into an Igbo song halfway through his sermon (37). At the height of his alienation, he bans his father from stepping into his home because he refuses to convert to Christianity. Besides his father, he also bans other well-known traditionalists from stepping into his compound, for instance, Anikwema (78).

The extent of Eugene's alienation is reflected in his first name which was obviously given to him by his white fathers at baptism. It is instructive that his sister is referred to as "Ifeoma", her Igbo name throughout the narrative, but he chooses to be addressed by his English name, "Eugene" even by his father. Thus he remains unrepentantly foreign in his native land till death. This is a signal to the schizophrenia in Eugene; he is essentially an alienated character, who lives in an African environment that he considers inferior, where things are not done the right way, the Whiteman's way.

Critically assessing the early life chronotope of Eugene, a number of quirks in his character can be clarified. First, Eugene's Eurocentricism is born out of his gratefulness and loyalty to his white Catholic fathers who not only brought him out of darkness into God's marvellous light but gave him Western education which liberated him from the prison-house of unrelieved poverty. Second, Eugene's love for education and undoubted charity is also better understood in the light of the privations of his early life chronotope where he was forced to walk many miles to attend primary school, and he had to be a gardener and houseboy to the Whiteman to enable him attend secondary school in the prestigious St. Gregory's, Lagos, far, far away from Abba. It is therefore not so surprising that in later life, Eugene donates to charity organisations, sets up a gifted children's programme in his church, and even wills part of his immense wealth to these organisations after his demise. Third, his penchant for schedules and time-tables can also be explained by his boarding house experience which is a kind of regimented barracks life. Unfortunately, he overdoes it to the extent that he stifles to death his children's joie de vie. Home is supposed to be a place for relaxation and familial interactions, but for Jaja and Kambili, it is a barracks of sorts where everything is timed so tightly that there is no time to watch television (87). Singing is not on the schedule (133), neither is laughter (148). As a matter of fact, chatting is not on the schedule at home which is the main reason why the siblings have to speak with their eyes or minds when in the presence of their father.

In contrast, all of these positive attributes of the home are present in Ifeoma's Nsukka flat, despite the dilapidating chairs in the parlour, the absence of a running tap leading to toilets that are not constantly flushed, earthworm infested bathrooms, empty gas cylinders, small food servings and watery soups with small stringy pieces of meat. Later in the narrative, this cramped and poverty wracked quarters becomes a sanctuary of comfort for the traumatised duo away from their opulent but oppressive home chronotope in Enugu. Fourth, Eugene's insistence that his children must always come first in every test or examination is also clarified by our study of his early life chronotope. Having being saved from poverty and hopelessness through academic assiduity (only the best academically are admitted into such top-notch mission schools as St. Gregory's, Lagos or were sent abroad for higher education), Eugene instinctively demanded the best from his children. Fifth, his lack of respect and love for his father is also shown to be a result of the latter's inability to provide such facilities for him. He unconsciously blames his father for being too poor to educate him without his having to go through the acute suffering he passed through to make it in life. And that is why he raves at Kambili when she comes second in a term test:

I didn't have a father who sent me to the best schools. My father spent his time worshipping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission. I was a houseboy for the parish priest for two years. Yes, a houseboy. Nobody dropped me off at school. I walked eight miles every day to Nimo until I finished elementary school. I was a gardener for the priests while I attended St. Gregory's Secondary School. (55, emphasis mine)

Eugene is so obsessed with coming first academically that he once beat up his son for not coming first in his First Holy Communion Class. At the end of the punishment, the little finger of the little boy's right hand was deformed for life (153). What Eugene fails to realise is that the dynamics of his time and that of his children is not the same. He

was impelled to be the best in order to survive and escape from abject poverty. No such pressure impels his children; they were born into affluence. Nevertheless, they are compelled to be the best out of mortal fear, the fear of the torture that their father would visit on them if they ever come second in any academic test or examination.

Looking closely at the early life chronotope of Eugene, a lacuna becomes glaringly apparent; the absence of a mother figure in his and Ifeoma's lives in their childhood. As a matter of fact, neither Eugene nor Ifeoma mentioned their mother throughout the novel. The importance of the mother in the upbringing of a child cannot be over-emphasised. Her presence has a stabilising effect on her children, most especially the male child. Freudian psychology calls the unusually strong link between mother and son the Oedipus Complex, implying that a subliminal sexual attraction is at the root of the male child's attachment to the mother in its early pre-puberty stage of life. The opposite of the Oedipus Complex in Freudian psychology is the Electra Complex which attempts to explain the unusually strong link between daughter and father. The veracity of both concepts is not our concern in this paper, but the undeniable strong link between Kambili and her father Eugene is evident in the narrative. So is the love between Ifeoma and Papa Nnukwu.

Unfortunately for Eugene, the stabilising presence of a mother is conspicuously absent in his early life chronotope. One could only surmise that the mother died shortly after the birth of Ifeoma, implying that Eugene only had mother care for the first few years of his life while Ifeoma probably never had. For Ifeoma, this is not an entire loss as she still has her father who loves her and is beloved of her. For Eugene, the loss is total. He had no motherly love in his early years, and very early in life religion puts a wedge between him and his father to the extent that he is totally alienated from his father even after the latter's death. Having, therefore, been denied motherly love in his childhood, it is little wonder that he does not know how to care for a wife in his adulthood. It could also be inferred that just as Eugene blames his father for being too poor to send him to the best

schools, he also blames his dead mother for not being there to comfort and guide him during his difficult moments in life. He then subconsciously transfers the “guilt” of his late mother to his innocent wife, and visits the punishment he mentally reserves for his absentee mother on his physically present wife. So the wife could be said to be a victim of transfer of aggression, suffering for the sin of absenteeism committed by Eugene’s too-soon-dead mother. That is one plausible explanation of Eugene’s unreasonable battering of his wife.

However, the greatest cause of Eugene’s brutality to his wife and children is religion, the Catholic version of the Christian religion. The religious environment is the most forceful chronotope in the life of a believer. The Jesuits once boasted that given the complete control of the first six years of a child’s life, they were willing to be held responsible for his deeds and misdeeds throughout his life. In other words, they would have so implanted their beliefs into the child that he would not be able to depart from the path they have mapped out for him no matter his circumstances in later life. The veracity of this boast is vividly demonstrated in the life of Eugene. Eugene attended primary and secondary schools established and run by the Catholic Church. His father is a traditionalist (Eugene calls him a heathen) and refuses to convert to Christianity, a sore point between the two of them till death. Eugene, on his part, converted to Christianity and became a Catholic because of its obvious advantages: access to Western education and rapid progress in the modern world for those educated and favoured by the white missionaries. By the time Eugene became a wealthy and influential adult, he had also become a fanatic, body, spirit and soul, loving those who subscribe to Catholicism more than the rest of the world he labels “heathens”. Thus, while Eugene hates his heathen father, he loves his Catholic father-in-law who is a Knight of St. John. According to the narrator, Eugene adored and still adores his father-in-law even after the latter’s death:

Papa still talked about him often, his eyes proud, as if Grandfather were his own father. He opened his eyes before many of our people did, Papa would say; he was

one of the few who welcomed the missionaries. Do you know how quickly he learned English? When he became an interpreter, do you know how many converts he helped win? Why, he converted most of Abba himself. *He did things the right ways, the way the white people did, not what our people do now!* Papa had a photo of Grandfather in the full regalia of the Knights of St. John, framed in deep mahogany and hung on our wall back in Enugu. (76, emphasis mine)

Eugene's love for his Catholic father-in-law is further demonstrated by his annual visit to his father-in-law's house every Christmas, years after he had died. In contrast, Eugene never visits his biological father till the latter's death, but every Christmas he sends Kevin his driver to give Papa-Nnukwu "a slim ward of naira...slimmer than he gave Kevin as Christmas bonus" (70). Three pieces of vital information are contained in the quote above. One, Eugene subconsciously transfers the love, respect and duty he owes his biological father to his father-in-law because he is a Catholic. Two, Eugene suffers from reckless mental colonisation; to him the right way of doing things "is the way white people did" (76). In Nigerian parlance, this is known as colonial mentality, a local parlance describing an alienated character. Three, Eugene must have married his wife not out of love but out of a sense of duty because she is the daughter a devout Catholic. This may also account for his monstrous treatment of his wife, for it is inconceivable for a husband to beat to pulp the wife he loves no matter how grievous the offence. Even the Bible says that love covers all sins, which implies that the absence of love at the beginning of Eugene's marriage to his wife will magnify and blow every little infraction out of proportion in the eyes of the husband. In essence, Eugene must have married his wife to fulfil the biblical injunction that Christians must not be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6:14), which means that a believer should not marry outside the Christian fold.

But having married her, he discovers that they are not really compatible. While Eugene is a forceful but colourful man, the wife is



totally colourless and mousy! While Eugene is rich and powerful, the wife being the daughter of an interpreter obviously brought very little materially and financially into the marriage. While Eugene is highly educated, a graduate of a university in the United Kingdom, Mama never saw the inside of a university. All these cow Mama in the presence of Eugene, seeing that her social and economic well-being is totally dependent on the goodwill of her abusive husband. And so she rebuffs Ifeoma's sensible suggestion that she divorces her husband: "You and your university talk" (83). In the village chronotope as at 1993 which is the assumed time-locus of Eugene in the novel, it is acceptable for a rich man such as Eugene to have more than one wife. In other words, polygamy is still in an acceptable practice in the Nigerian environment of the book and the larger society. Accordingly, members of his umuna (age grade) tell him to take another wife because a big man like him should not be content with only two children (83). But he refuses to bow to societal and traditional pressures for him to take a second wife because in the Christian religious chronotope both divorce and polygamy are anathema to Catholicism. So Eugene is saddled with a wife he obviously does not love. He would have loved to behave like Chief Nanga in Achebe's *A Man of the People* who plans to marry Edna as his parlour wife, because she is younger and more educated than his first wife. Another example in African literature is Ocol in Okotp'btek's *Song of Lawino* who drives out Lawino his first wife in favour of Clementine, the modern woman. In the two cases mentioned above, both Nanga and Ocol married their first wives when they were struggling to climb the social ladder. But having arrived at the top, they suddenly discovered that their first wives are too "bush" for their new status as emerging political leaders in their communities. Hence they sought relieve in a second wife.

But being a devout Catholic, a big man in his church, one of the people praised by the white Father Benedict from the pulpit, an officer in the church, etc. etc., Eugene is trapped in the web of his own belief system and the expectations of other believers in his religious chronotope. So he could not divorce his wife nor marry another as

other big men in his society do. This leads to frustration which he often expresses by beating up his wife at the slightest provocation. In sum, the main motive behind Eugene's brutality towards his family is traceable to tensions associated with his religious chronotope. A critical analysis of the instances of Eugene's beastliness towards his own children and his wife shows they spring from infringements of one religious tenet or another.

Eugene's whipping of mother along with the children in the narrative occurs because of their sin of encouraging Kambili to eat a little cornflakes before ingesting Panadoltablets in violation of the Eucharist fast which demands that the faithful should abstain from food till the Mass is over (109). As mentioned earlier, the deformation of Jaja's little finger by Eugene happened because he missed two questions in his First Holy Communion Class at ten years of age (153). Eugene's burning of Kambili's feet with hot water happened because "You knew you would be sleeping in the same house as a heathen...So you saw the sin clearly and you walked right into it" (201). Eugene's batteing of Kambili till she loses consciousness is also a result of her "sin" of wanting to keep the painting of her grandfather who Eugene has dubbed a heathen and a candidate for hellfire for refusing to convert to Christianity (216). Eugene's brutalisation of Mama until she loses her first pregnancy after a long interval is caused by her sin of complaining that she is feeling too tired to go and greet Father Benedict after Mass. Even though she changes her mind and follows him, she is still battered by Eugene when they return home (37-41). We are not told the reason Eugene breaks a small table on Mama's belly thereby making her lose the second pregnancy, but the fact that the instrument of violent abortion is "that small table where we kept the family Bible" (253) gave the crime a religious undertone. All these point to a hidden cause within the religious chronotope besides the facile excuse of religious fanaticism. Eugene reveals this hidden cause when he tells Kambili about the harsh punishment meted out to him when the reverend Father he was staying with in St. Gregory's caught him masturbating:

“I committed a sin against my own body once,” he said.  
“And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St. Gregory’s, came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in....I never sinned against my own body again. The good father did that for my own good,” he said. (203)

Given Eugene’s slavish conviction that the Whiteman always does things the right way, it is not surprising that he is so brutal to his family over any small incident that has any appearance of sin. He believes he is doing it for their own good, purging them of sin as violently as his “good father” purged him violently of his sin of masturbation by burning his fingers in hot water. And that is why he sheds tears to show that he does not enjoy that mode of punishment but deemed it necessary to administer it for the good of members of his family.

As Ayo Kehinde observes, the oppression, violence and abuse of human rights that a military regime foists on the people in its socio-political environment contributed largely to the violence in interpersonal relationship and individual homes. Eugene’s household is no exception. But beyond this, our study of the religious chronotope shows that, inadvertently, religion may have contributed to the malaise. For instance, polygamy is accepted in the traditional chronotope in Nigeria but condemned in the Catholic religious chronotope. Even though the Bible says wives should be treated like the weaker vessel and not beaten because no man yet loves himself and also beats himself, traditional practices and some religious denominations in Nigeria turn a blind eye to wife and children abuse. For example, Father Benedict is aware that Eugene often beats his wife and children, but says nothing because he is the financial pillar of the parish. Even when Eugene nearly kills his daughter, Kambili, a reverend sister coaches her in the hospital, showing that the church at that age and time, regards the brutality of one’s family members as a mere “family affair” not to be dabbled into by the priests and the society. Hence, Eugene is never sanctioned by the society or the

church for such heinous crimes against his family thereby fuelling his manic tendencies. Until recently, such acts have been swept under the carpet, and even the police in Nigeria are reluctant to intervene in “family affairs”.

### **Chronotope and Identity Crisis in Eugene Achike**

As noted above, Erikson defines identity crisis as “a time of intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself...in which people struggle between feelings of identity versus role confusion” (732). In other words, the character undergoing identity crisis has a problem aligning his perception of self with the expectations of the society regarding the various roles he has to fulfil or commit to: a Christian brother and elder, a father, a husband, an employer, a son, etc. When we match Eugene’s identity with the roles society expects him to play in accordance with Marcia’s four identity statuses (identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, identity diffusion, and identity achievement), it will be obvious that Eugene displays a lack of understanding or unwillingness to understand some of the roles expected of him by society. And this leads to confusion and identity crisis in him. As a Christian Brother and elder, Eugene is expected by society to love God and love the brethren. He is expected to attend church services regularly, be a worker in the church, be charitable to all especially those in the household of faith, and being rich, to be extra humble in order to make heaven. By and large, Eugene fulfils this role but does not commit to certain aspects of the role. For instance, the greatest commandment in the scriptures is to love one another. This love, Christ says should not be limited to members of one’s household but to one’s enemies as well, by which it is meant those who disagree with us on any issue. To buttress his point, Christ had compassion on both his disciples and those who are not, healed them all and ultimately died and rose again to save them all. But Eugene loves only those of the Catholic faith and demonstrates outright hatred to all others, including his own father. It is certain that Eugene commits to his role as a Christian, but is not committed to the most important aspect of this role. Consequently, his status with regards to the role of a Christian brother is at best

identity moratorium; he is willing to make choices but does not commit fully to all the societal expectations of the role.

As an employer, Eugene is totally committed. He supports his editor Ade Coker completely in his crusade against military oppression. When the latter is eventually murdered by the junta, he takes care of the deceased's family admirably. He pays his workers well to the extent that a low-level worker like his driver, Kevin, gets a handsome Christmas bonus. Even his gateman eulogises him as "the best employer he had ever had" (111); Eugene pays the school fees of the gateman's son. As a chief in his town, he also plays his role admirably, feasting his umunna (age-grade) at intervals, helping individuals with funds, and contributing immensely to community projects. He also commits admirably to the role of a philanthropist, giving money to many indigent individuals and organisations like orphanages and similar institutions. For all these roles, the most appropriate identity status is identity achievement which describes an individual who makes choices and commits to them. It is notable that Eugene appears fulfilled when he plays the role of employer, chief and philanthropist. But when we examine his familial roles, we see a man at war with himself and totally conflicted.

As a son, Eugene is a failure. He has the capacity to spoil his father with money till the latter passes on, but he refuses to do so because his father would not convert to Christianity. He would not visit him personally, but only sends his driver to give him a little amount of money at Christmas. He does not show love to his father, and certainly dishonours him in several ways, for example, banning him from stepping into his palatial country home unless he converts to Christianity. He has forgotten that the Bible says a man should honour his father and mother so that he would live long (Exodus 20: 12). No wonder, he dies relatively young. As a husband, Eugene is also a failure because he believes that pummelling his wife at every excuse is the best way to show his superiority over her. Eugene is also confused about his role as a father. To him, fatherhood begins and ends with the payment of school fees in expensive schools, and providing other

welfare packages for his children. However, the brutality he metes out to those children cancels out all the comfort that his money could ever provide. In sum, Eugene succeeds in building wonderful mansions but does not know how to build a home. His status in all these very important roles is identity moratorium. Since a man's family is the bedrock of his social and psychological life, Eugene's failure in his familial roles breeds in him an identity crisis which precipitates his sadistic actions and calamitous ending in the novel.

### **The Path not Chosen**

As this paper comes to an end, it is important to ponder on the probable fate of Eugene had his chronotopes been different from what they are in the narrative. First, had he been born into a less impecunious home, he probably would have been less pushful but more caring about family instead of placing the acquisition of wealth first and family second. Had his mother been alive for as long as his father, he could have learnt to cherish his wife more and probably not die so horribly through the poison administered by her. Had he not been brought up in the strict Catholic environment of priests and reverend sisters in his growing up years, he probably would never have ended up a fanatic and would have been more tolerant of the faults of his wife and children. He also would have not disrespected/dishonoured his father and lived longer. Of course, this would also mean that he could end up as an average character devoid of the awesome influence and power that wealth confers. But then, since his wealth could not really prevent him from an early death, it is not of ultimate importance to him,

### **Conclusion**

From the fore-going, it is obvious that character and identity formation are dependent on both innate compositions and the inevitable influence of the environment in which each character is immersed from birth. Even though identity crisis is usually associated with adolescence, it is apparent that its causative agents could be repressed only to return when the environment is right even in adulthood. By scrutinising Adichie's main character in *Purple Hibiscus* under different chronotopes, this paper asserts that the weirdness in

Eugene's personality is a consequence of identity crisis fostered in him by complex social forces in the different chronotopes he has had to pass through in the course of a short and tragic life.

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