



## **African Novel as a Work of Social Criticism: A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

**Francis Oseghale**

*Faculty of Arts, Department of English, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma,  
Nigeria*

### **ABSTRACT**

Authors do not write in vacuum. In every age, they write to reflect the circumstances prevailing in their environment at a particular time. So, most of the young generation of African writers deal with the social, political, economic and moral decay ravaging the African society. These problems range from evils in government, religious hypocrisy, political vendetta economic deprivation, tribal hegemony, class struggle and sex marginalization. These young writers, being products of African society, have reflected in their works these evils ravaging the continent. The aim of these writers is to expose these ills with the sole aim of correcting and eradicating them in our society. It is in this notion to expose, correct and eradicate these social vices in our society that Chimamanda Adichie has exemplified in her work *Purple Hibiscus*.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Post – independent African literature deals with the social issues bedeviling the African society. African writers in novels like Chinua Achebe's *A Man Of The People*, Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood* and Festus Iyayi's *Violence* portray the corruption of our political leaders, resulting in the object poverty of the plebeians and the pervading state of moral and social decay in most African countries. Hence, they are commonly called novels of post – colonial disillusionment. Apart from these writers, most of our young modern writers still deal with the contemporary problem in independent African countries. They attack the social problems retarding the progress of the African states. One of these young African writers is Chimamanda Adichie.

In the novel entitled *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie the author lampoons the vices, follies, crimes and the general social problems in the Nigerian society. Such heinous crimes are bribery and corruption,

## *A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*

embezzlement of public funds, religious hypocrisy, greed, unwarranted killings, destruction of government property, non-charlatan attitude by the government to the welfare of the workers and the general sense of insecurity of life and property in the Nigerian society. These socio-political problems emanate from the fact that most of our secular and religious leaders are insensitive to the plights of the people they lead. They are parochial and highly egocentric. They are only interested in mundane things and are always after egoistic advantages at the expense of the people they govern.

### **Social Problems in *Purple Hibiscus*.**

In the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Adichie mirrors the religious hypocrisy, pretence and the Christian life of Eugene Achike, his relationship with his old father Pa Nnukwu, his wife and Children. The novel also tells us the ills perpetuated by the political leaders and government officials in Nigeria. The novel comments on Nigerian politics and how dangerous it is to be against bad government. Ade Coker, a journalist, lost his life for reporting the truth about the evils in government in Nigeria.

Chimamanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* vividly mirrors the religious hypocrisy and pretence among the Christians in Nigeria society. This is clearly exemplified in the character of Eugene Achike who is taken as a devote and practicing Christian who adheres strictly to all the Catholic dogma. Eugene Achike is seen as very holy. This is the sole reason why the Parish Priest of St. Agnes Catholic Church Revered Father Benedict presents him to the church members as a model worthy of emulation and makes him a Eucharistic Minister. Eugene donates generously to the church. He funds most of the projects single handedly and gives alms to the needy. Hence, the author says of him:

On some Sundays, the congregation listened closely when Father Benedict talked about Papa making the biggest donations to Peter's Pence, and St. Vincent de Paul. Or about Papa paying for the cartons of communion wine, for the new oven at the convent...(5)

Eugene here is like the police Inspector Chike in Wale Okediran's *Stranger Encounters* who contributes generously to the church from his ill-gotten money. He is loved and praised by Revered Father Raleigh without questioning the source of his wealth. However, contrary to his avowed Christian faith, Eugene neglects his old father Pa Nnukwu, the old man lives in abject poverty, penury, squalor, hunger and deplorable condition incompatible with the exalted wealth and position of his son Eugene. Eugene neglects his father because he refuses to throw away his personal god and be converted to the Christian faith. So, he hates his father. He sees his father as a leper. He neither cares for him at his old age nor allows him into his house.

## *Francis Oseghale*

Expressing her resentment over Eugene's treatment of their father, Aunty Ifeoma Eugene's sister states:

Our father is dying do you heat me? Dying. He is an old man and how much longer does he have, God? Yet, Eugene will not let him into his house, will not even greet him Ojoka. Eugene has to stop doing God's work. (95)

Eugene Achike, the devoted Christian is wicked, harsh, rash and devoid of human feeling. He subjects his wife and children to both mental agony and moral anguish. He beats his wife and children always. He subjects them to perpetual bondage and psychological trauma. He is a bully, animalistic, savage and a terror to members of his family, meting out punishment and beating them over every little provocation. Commenting on the beating he gives his wife and children on one occasion, Kambili States:

He unbuckled his belt slowly... it landed on Jaja first, across his shoulders. Then Mama raised her hand as it landed on her upper arm... I put the dowl down just as the bet landed on my back.. (102)

On one of such occasions, Eugene almost beats his daughter Kambili to death. She becomes unconscious and she was hospitalized. On two occasions, the beating leads to his wife's miscarriages. Eugene burns his children's toes in hot water as a corrective measure and succeeds in deforming Jaja's hand. Eugene is like Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* who is devoid of the milk of human kindness when dealing with his erring wives and children.

Adichie also exposes the hypocrisy and evil practice in churches especially in the Catholic Church. For example, the leaders condemn the charismatic Revered Fathers, who introduce the Pentecostal mode of worship and preaching. They petition such priests and get them transferred. Condemning the mode of singing and preaching by a visiting priest Eugene says:

That young priest singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal Churches that spring up every where like mushroom, people like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him. (29)

The author also condemns the indiscriminate and intimidating manner in which church leaders force their members to contribute to and make pledges in their attempt to raise money for the churches. In most cases, the members become fed up with the regular demands on them that they begin to grumble.

Also, Adichie attacks the evil practice of some Nigerians who neglect their parents especially at old age, only to spend huge sums of money in giving such neglected parents elaborate burial ceremonies when they die. The

## *A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*

author denounces this practice badly. This type of practice depicts neglect, pain, suffering, poverty, bitterness and regret as stated by the authorial voice:

Pa Nnukwu stopped, turned to look back towards our house, Nekerom, look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Aba, and many times I have nothing to put in my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries. (83)

Eugene is one of such Nigerians who neglects his father. However, after his death, he sends huge sum of money to his sister, Auntie Ifeoma for his burial.

Eugene neglects of his father is comparable to the neglect of Nnu Ego by her two sons Oshia and Adim in *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta. Nnu Ego suffers to train them. However, Oshia now lives in America and Adim in Canada. They neglect their mother in her old age and she dies on the roadside. She receives in death the attention which her sons deny her in life. According to the author:

She had the nosiest and mostly costly second burial Ibuza had ever seen and a shrine was made in her name, so that her grandchildren could appeal to her should they be barren. (224)

Such neglect and eventual death readily reminds one of the way tragedy is conceptualized in Igbo traditional society which both Adichie and Buchi Emecheta bring to the limelight in their works. According to Ernest Emenyonu:

Tragedy in the Igbo situation is not in the feeling that nothing goes right for the individual, but that any success he attains is followed sooner or later by a bigger and more terrible misfortune. This is constant reality in Igbo life, which among some Igbo groups is described as the phenomenon of Ume. (31)

Chimamanda Adichie also mirrors the ills in the Nigerian socio-political terrain attacking the politicians and the military men. She exposes and denounces the evils they have melted on Nigerians since independence in 1960 to date. She condemns the soldiers who capitalize on every opportunity to overthrow the government in power. The saddest and most sorrowful of it is that the soldiers who carry out coups and overthrow the government in power are not better than the corrupt and morally bankrupt politicians or other soldiers they overthrow. They only succeed in plunging the country and Nigerians into more economic and political misery. Their actions lead to anarchy and chaos.

Chimamanda lampoons Nigerians at the helm of affairs. He asserts that most of them are corrupt, they embezzle and defraud public funds meant for the payment of workers salaries and national developments. They send money to foreign banks and think less of alleviating the poor condition of life of the masses in the country.

## *Francis Oseghale*

The author further points out that the same docile public who do not welcome such coups are forced to show solidarity to the new military rulers soon after they take over power. This they do in order to avoid intimidation, abuse and molestation by the unscrupulous elements who take laws into their hands. Hence, the authors says:

The first week after the coup, Kelvin plucked green branches every morning and stuck them to the car... The green branches meant solidarity... once I saw a man kneeling on the road beside his Peugeot 504, with his hands raised high in the air. (27)

The rate of corruption among most African ruling elites is so high that Robert Fraser commenting on the corrupt and moral laxity of Joseph Koomson in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* says:

His mind perennially occupied with money – making schemes, he glories in the kudos of his office with no apparent sense of responsibility towards those to whom he owes it. (17)

This is the type of corruption among most Nigerian ruling elites that Chimamanda is highly against. Chimamanda also lunches attack on the activities of drug barons in mirroring the ills in the society. She emphasizes that the highly placed in the society who ought to check drug peddling are themselves directly or indirectly involved in it. Such individuals sometimes pay some people to peddle cocaine and heroine for them.

The author ridicules the Nigerian law enforcement agents who destroy peoples means of livelihood and terrorise innocent citizens. The soldiers, the police and the law enforcement agents have turned themselves into tools for destruction in Nigeria in the name of maintaining law and order and destroying illegal structures. These they do to the detriment of the innocent citizens who are handicapped. They claim to be giving the towns a facelift. Adichie depicts here the planlessness and disorderliness of Nigerian urban towns. She also exposes how the law enforcement agents destroy peoples' stores and shads without prior notice to the owners, thereby subjecting them to untold hardship and starvation. She states that:

Soldiers were milling round. Market were shouting, and many had both hands placed on their heads, in the way people do to show despair and shock. A woman lay by in the dirt, wailing, tearing at her short afro... I saw a soldier raise a whip in the air. The whip was long. It coiled in the air before it landed on the woman's shoulder. Another soldier was kicking down popoyos with his boots and laughing. (44)

Adichie equally castigates the government for not being able to ensure adequate fuel supply in the country. Nigeria is the largest producer of petroleum in Africa and the third largest producer in the world. Yet, petrol is

## *A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*

imported for domestic use. There is scarcity of petroleum product always. The outcome of this is the queues of vehicles at petrol stations everywhere in the country. Even when fuel is available the cost is beyond the reach of the common Nigerian, yet, the government does nothing to redress the situation. Hence Auntie Ifeoma says:

We have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka. spent the night in the petrol station last week waiting for fuel. And at the end, the fuel did not come. Some people left their cars in the station because they did not have enough fuel to drive back home. (76)

The author further criticizes the abnormal and ugly situation in Nigerian universities. She lashes the Nigerian government officers who neglect the adequate funding of our universities. Instead, they embezzle the fund meant for the educational sector. Nigerian universities are in deplorable condition. The lecture halls, offices and staff quarters are in sorrowful state. Kambili describes the state of Auntie Ifeoma's house in the staff quarters of the University of Nsukka:

An earthworm was slithering in the bathroom, near the drain when I went in to take a bath in the morning... the pipes were old Amaka had said, and every rainy season earthworms made their way into the bathtub... (232)

The writer also denounces the vices perpetuated by the government leading to incessant strike actions by the public workers. Workers are poorly paid by government and they do not get their salaries regularly and on time. The universities are hardest hit by incessant strike actions by the university workers especially the academic staff. Their salaries are poor, as a result of this, they resort to strike action to demand for higher salaries.

Adichie also criticizes the poor attitudes of universities administrators and the government towards the plights of the students in their demands for better living conditions. The university authorities do not care for the students' welfare. The students often encounter power failure and lack of water for months. It is worst during examination periods, life becomes hard and unbearable for then that they resort to riots since that is the only means of expressing their grievances and getting the attention of the university authorities. During such riots at the University of Nsukka, students chant:

Sole administrator must go.  
He doesn't wear pant oh!  
Head of State must go.  
He doesn't wear pant oh!  
Where is running water?  
Where is light?  
Where is petrol? (228)

## *Francis Oseghale*

Such riots lead to the destruction of the university property and sometimes loss of lives.

Another heinous crime associated with the university which the author of *Purple Hibiscus* criticizes with disgust is witch hunting by sycophants and the university authorities. The university authorities unjustly persecute some innocent lecturers accusing them of instigating students' unrest. The authorities use the law enforcement agents to terrorise and harass such innocent lecturers.

The evil activities of National Electric Power Authority (NEPA) now called Power Holding Company (PHCN) are equally exposed by Chimamanda. Electricity supply in the country is erratic resulting in the hardship experienced by Nigerians. Some areas experience power failure for as long as three to eight months with National Electric power Authority (NEPA) doing nothing to ameliorate the suffering of the people in such areas. Yet, at the end of the month, NEPA Officers shamelessly distribute light bills to residents in these areas without light. They keep complaining about break down transformers. Obiora, Aunty Ifeoma's son says: "They have been taking the light too often the past week".(234) The incessant power failure poses problems to people. Those who use light to work are rendered idle and things stored in refrigerators get rotten leading to serious wastage.

The author also ridicules the evil consequences of corruption in Nigeria. The various administrators in the country mismanaged the resources of the country. This mismanagement leads to high rate of unemployment and poor condition of service for the few that are employed. The outcome of this is the mass exodus of able bodied Nigerians to oversea countries in search for better opportunities. However, if these Nigerians succeed in getting to Europe, they do not get good jobs. They are made to go menial jobs, which they would never have agreed to do in Nigeria.

Adichie equally, satirises the ill treatment journalists are given in the course of performing their legitimate duties. The corrupt politicians and those in authority do not want to hear the truth. They harass and embarrass journalists who publish the true stories about their evil activities. In this novel, the editor of the Standard Newspaper is arrested for publishing stories about the Head of State and his wife's involvement in drug peddling. Apart from the constant arrest of journalists, some end up losing their lives. Hence, the author says:

It rained heavily the day Ade coker died... Ade was blown up when he opened the package a package everybody has known was from the Head of State even if his wife Yewande had not said that Ade Coke looked at the envelope and said "it has the state house seal" before he opened it. (206)

From the above, we can see that Chimamanda Adichie is like Ayi kwei Armah in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Born* in constigating the corruption in Nigeria and Ghana respectively. Ayi Kwe Armah castigates the Ghanaian

## *A Study of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus*

politicians for betraying the confidence reposed on them by the masses. Hence, Robert Fraser says:

The political elite of the country, which had been so loud, from a far in their fraternity, had apparently given themselves up to an orgy of spending. (19)

Another heinous crime the author ridicules in Nigeria is the evil activities of the Nigeria Police, who mount road blocks to extort money from motorists. This practice of blocking the roads with logs poses danger to motorists. Chimamanda Adichie attacks of the corrupt Nigerian Police is like Chinua Achebe's denouncement of the Police in *No Longer At Ease* for being corrupt, Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer At Ease* is infuriated when he sees the policemen taking bribe from the driver of the lorry conveying him from Lagos to Umuofia. So, by implication, this instinct of corruption has been with the Nigerian police right from the very beginning.

The author in this novel also exposes the inferior status given to women by men in the society. In the traditional society, the female child has no value in the family. They are mere tools in the hands of men. Apart from this painful fact, the women are marginalized by the entire society. This maltreatment of the women is as a result of the fact that they are regarded as inferior to men. This confirms the view expressed by K.K. Ruthven when she says:

The subjugation of women is brought about not by their natural inferiority but by their classification as intrinsically inferior by a male dominate culture they cannot avoid living. (44)

Hence, Papa Nnukwu in the novel expresses the general impression of the men about the female child when he addresses his daughter Ifeoma. "But you are a woman. You do not count. (83)

However, Chimamanda disapproves the men, establishing the fact that when given opportunities with men, women can excel better than men in the society. Hence, Papa Nnukwu says to his daughter in affirmation and approval of her new role in the family:

I joke with you, Nwam. Where could I have been today if my Chi had not given me a daughter. (83)

The above statement by Papa Nnukwu attests to the fact that women can perform better than men in the society when given the opportunity.



## CONCLUSION

We can see from this novel entitled *Purple Hibiscus* that Chimamanda Adichie has been able to expose the political, social, religious and economic ills in our society with the hope of proffering solutions to them. The solutions to them will only come when we have progressive, pragmatic and dedicated leaders who are true ministers of the people, leaders that will ensure equality, liberty and fraternity in dealing with the people.

## WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua (1996). *A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1958) *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (1958) . *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Adichie, Chimamanda (1996). *Purple Hibiscus*. North Carolina, Algonquin Books.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei (1985). *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. London: Heinemann.
- Emecheta, Buchi (1979). *The Joys of Motherhood* London: Allison and Bushy.
- Emenyonu, Ernest (1975). "Who does Flora Nwakpa Writes For?" in *Africa Literature Today*. Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. No.7 London; Heinemann.
- Fraser, Robert (1980). *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah*. London: Heinemann.
- Iyayi, Festus. (1979). *violence*. Longman, Lagos.
- Okediran, Wale. (2004). *Strange Encounters*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Thiongo, Ngugi Wa. (1977). *Petals of Blood*. London: Heinemann.