

Exploring the Religion and Culture Conflicts Experienced by the Igbo in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Ms. Desiree Ann. A

Assistant Professor of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous),
Tiruchirappalli- 620002

Mail id: desireeannarokiaraj@gmail.com

Dr.J. Minny, (Retd.)

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor
Department of English
Periyar E.V.R. College
Tiruchirappalli-620023

ABSTRACT

Purple Hibiscus is an Nigerian novel set in postcolonial Nigeria. The westernization and western education of the land has made the native Nigerians distrust their own customs and religious beliefs. Numerous Igbos got converted to Christianity with the influence of the Christian Missionaries and Western Education. Many traditional customs started disappearing and the Colonizers made the Nigerians believe in their traditional beliefs were inferior. This culture clash is represented in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* through the eyes of a fifteen year old girl Kambili who happens to observe silently the native culture undergoing a massive change. Adichie, recipient of the Common Wealth Prize has remarkably not only brought out the impact of colonization of Nigeria but also the emotional struggle and confusions experienced by the traditional Nigerians as a result of the colonization in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

Keywords : Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Culture, Clash, Conflict, Religion, Struggle, Igbo, Tradition

“The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our

clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.” (Obierika in *Things Fall Apart*, 176)

The culture of Nigeria is shaped by Nigeria's various ethnic groups. The three major ethnic groups are Hausa – Fulani, Igbo, and Yoruba. Seventy percent of Nigeria is made up of the Igbo tribe and the Yoruba tribe. Nigeria has a lot of Cultural diversities: art, music, dance, food, religion language and literature. The westernization of Nigeria and western education has left Nigeria in a massive state of confusion and conflicts, especially with religion and traditional beliefs. Toyin Falola has rightly noted that the contributions of Africans to ethnic problems began during the colonial period.

Adichie has explicitly displayed the religious conflicts in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The novel depicts the culture and religious confusion in Nigeria namely the western culture clashing with the traditional Igbo culture through the eyes of the fifteen year old Kambili. The end of colonialism has left Nigerians confused. The Christian Missionaries and western education has compelled most Nigerians to practice Christianity.

Nigerians got converted to Christianity and started preaching the word of God and following Christianity in a very staunch way. The impact on the Nigerians of practicing Christianity is reflected in most of the Nigerian Novels. In the novel *Under the Udala Trees* by Chinelo Okparanta the protagonist Ijeoma's mother compels her daughter to read the Bible every day. Ijeoma wonders at her mother's blind faith in the new religion but never questions her faith. Ijeoma and Kambili share almost similar feelings of the new religion but never question their parents' faith. Western education and Christianity brought about a sweeping change in the native Igbo beliefs and ideas practiced in the country and above all

convinced the Nigerians that Western religion is superior. Therefore the traditional beliefs and practices started to vanish as it was considered as a pagan culture and religion.

Nigeria is known world -wide for its indigenous culture and beliefs. Igbo is spoken widely in the Igbo people and had their own Igbo traditions, beliefs and deity's. When the foreign religion took over the Igbo land the Igbo people identity was at stake. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has made religion as the central theme of her novel *Purple Hibiscus* bringing out the struggle faced by the traditional Igbo's and the converted Christian Igbo's. The author has also brought to light the miseries of Nigerians where families and culture remain broken and chaotic under the fabrication of Colonialism. Toyin Falola rightly says colonialism came with a high price: Africans had to adopt many aspects of European cultures, even when they did not like them. Colonialism brought in changes in politics, economy, culture and religion.

The new religion has caused a lot of disorder and fissures between families which have long been following traditional Igbo culture and religion, handed down for thousands of generations. In *Purple Hibiscus* Papa Eugene, Kambili's father is seen as a devoted Christian, firm in his new religious belief, unshakable in his faith. The new religion taught the Converted Christians that their old religion and rituals was heathen. Keeping this in mind Papa Eugene shunned his own father who followed traditional Igbo values and rituals. Papa stopped talking to his own father and refused to step into Papa Nunkwu's house.

Papa Eugene is strictly against the pagan religion and does not allow his own family members to move with the other people who followed the traditional Igbo religion as it is considered 'sinful'. His new religion made him strict and harsh instead of making him compassionate and loving. Papa Eugene practiced the superficial rules of the new religion and forgot to relate to its fundamental teachings of being kind and loving. Papa's strictness in

following the new religion is evident from the very fact that he condemns converted Igbos although practiced Christianity, Papa found them still sinful as they allowed their relatives to practice pagan culture.

The Igwe's palace was a few minutes from our house. We had visited him once, some years back. We never visited him again, though, because Papa said that although the Igwe had converted, he still let his pagan relatives carry out sacrifices in his palace. (Adichie 94)

Igbo people have unique and magnificent culture and practices. They had a very traditional way of greeting people. Women were supposed to bend low in greeting someone. Papa being an ardent Christian follower he never liked anyone bowing down to people. According to him one should bow only in front of God and not before any human being. Once Mama happens to greet their neighbour Igwe by bowing down in public and Papa gets offended and warns her for her act and says it is sinful to bow in front of another man. He considers it as an ungodly action.

This novel is a coming of age novel where Kambili is in her adolescence age. An age where almost every girl is already emotionally disturbed and adding to it the confusion of religion, culture with the influence of western education leaves her still more confused and curious. Kambili's father brings up his daughter as a staunch Christian and also teaches her things that please and displease his God. This is evident from one of the incidents in the novel where Kambili learns from her father that traditional greeting is an ungodly thing and hence applies the same theory in refusing to bow to the Bishop. Kambili actually thought she was pleasing her father but unknowingly she creates anger in her father by not

kneeling to kiss the Bishop's ring. Later Papa yanks her ear in the car for disrespecting the Bishop. He further goes on to teach her that the Bishop was a man of God while Igwe was merely an 'ordinary human being'.

So, a few days later, when we went to see the bishop at Awka, I did not kiss his ring. I wanted to make Papa proud. But Papa yanked my ear in the car and said I did not have the spirit of discernment: the bishop was a man of God; the Igwe was merely a traditional ruler. (Adichie 94)

Papa Eugene was always found displeased with Papa- Nnukwu, Kambili's grandfather who was a traditional Igbo. His traditional beliefs were based on scientific reasons. Papa- Nnukwu had the skill of foretelling that it will be raining that evening even though there were no signs of dark clouds, his skill of foretelling is just a belief passed down by his ancestors. According to Kambili's grandfather when the sun is angry, he assures everyone that it will definitely rain that day. Papa says "Papa – Nnukwu used to say that angry sun like this in rainy season means that a swift rain will come. The sun is warning us of the rain" (Adichie 264).

Nigerians always took pride in their traditional practices. They gave much importance to their festivals and masquerades. The traditionalists believed that there was a reason behind every traditional celebration. They believed in the supreme deity Chukwu, believed in reincarnation and other forms of pagan rituals and festivals like the traditional masquerades, but all these beliefs and celebration were not liked by the converted Igbo Christians. Kambili's grandfather is a traditionalist who believed in the Igbo religion and its beliefs which made him to be disliked by his son Eugene, who in contrast is a firm Christian and detested the native Igbo traditions. Igbo culture unique and interesting especially the

traditional Masquerades which remains beautiful and captivating. Colonialism and Western Education has forced the Nigerians to abhor Masquerades as a pagan ritual.

For generations together masquerades had a deep spiritual meaning in the Igbo culture that has been passed on for generations. In many places the belief in spirits, a host of Gods, witchcraft “evil eye” etc was common. Names and means of worship were different, but many assumptions were common, such as the role of ancestors, the power of spirits, divination, and the worship of Gods associated with nature. Masquerades were found in many areas, even if their forms and function differed.

This traditional masquerade is a customary culture that suddenly became a pagan practice when the Christian missionaries took over the land. A traditional practice, a practice that has been native to the Igbo people for thousands of years has been destroyed and called it a pagan ritual turning the confused Igbo people against their own tradition and culture. Conflict begins when the native Igbo people started supporting the masquerades while the converted Christians Igbos were completely against Masquerades. Falalo in her book *The Power of Cultures* expresses how the Christians made the traditionalists believe that their spirits were “satanic” and “paganistic”. Converts were warned to avoid participation in rituals, ceremonies, and other activities that supposedly doomed their future salvation. (Falola 206)

Papa Eugene is one of the converted Igbo Nigerians who is against the masquerades. Not only he condemns the people participating in the masquerades but also warns his children by saying that even watching it was a sin. “Papa had driven us past the crowds at Ezi Icheke once, some years ago, and he muttered about ignorant people participating in the ritual of pagan masquerades.” (Adichie 85).

There is an air of pride and happiness in Papa Nnukwu when he speaks about his culture. “that is our agwonatumbe” (86). The traditional Igbo found their culture to be superior and passing it down to the next generation is most definitely the duty of the elders. The way Papa Nnukwu describes the masquerade with delight and vigor shows his roots and his devotion to his culture. He explains every single element of the masquerade with details that is sure to capture the attention of even non- Igbo people.

It is the most powerful mmuo in our parts, and all the neighboring villages fear Abba because of it. At last year’s Aro festival, agwonatumbe raised a staff and all the other mmuo turned and ran... Look! Obiora pointed at another mmuo moving down the road. It was like a floating white cloth, flat, taller than the huge avocado tree in our yard in Enegu.(Adichie 87)

Jaja and Kambili have been taught by their father that masquerades were heathen festival. Papa had brought them up in such a way that they were not given an opportunity to learn how their native festivals were celebrated. Christian Missionaries and Western Education had disconnected the converts from their own culture. The novel *Purple Hibiscus* reveals the stark truth of Nigerian families hiding their traditional festivals from their own children. It is heart wrecking to say that the disconnection brought about by the Christian Missionaries in Nigeria is a sign which implies that the future generation of Nigerians will have to learn about their own culture from another alien source.

“How do they do that, Papa – Nnukwu? How do people get inside that one? Jaja asked.“Shh! These are mmuo , spirits! Don’t speak like a woman!” Papa – Nnukwu snapped, turning to glare at Jaja.

Aunty Ifeoma laughed and spoke in English . “Jaja, you’re not supposed to say there are people in there. Didn’t you now that?”

“ No , Jaja said.

She was watching Jaja. “You didn’t do the ima mmuo, did you? Obiora did it two years ago in his father’s hometown.”

“No, I didn’t Jaja mumbled.

I looked at Jaja and wondered if the dimness in his eyes was shame. I suddenly wished, for him, that he had done the imm mmuo, the initiation into the spirit world I knew very little about it. (Adichie 87)

Folklore is traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, tradition passed on orally. Masquerades usually were constructed on folklore or traditional stories. The stories about Mmuo that takes place in the masquerades is based on folklore. This folklore was condemned as Devilish Folklore by the converted Igbo people. Adichie brings out the pathetic condition of the native culture vanishing from Africa.

In *Purple Hibiscus* Papa has warned his children against the Devilish Folklore of his ancestors “He said that the stories about mmuo, that they were spirits who had climbed out of ant holes, that they could make chairs run and baskets hold water, were all devilish folklore. *Devilish Folklore*. It sounded dangerous the way Papa said it.” (85). In contrast the magnificence and the grandeur of the masquerade is expressed with awe by Papa – Nnukwu “Look at this,” Papa Nnukwu said, “this is a woman spirit, and the women mmuo are harmless. They do not even go near the big ones at the festival.” (Adichie 85). The

magnificence of the Igbo cultural festival is evident from Adichie narrates in her novel the *Purple Hibiscus*.

Folktales are always found to be interesting. Children love to listen to Folktales. In folktales, the spider and the tortoise stories were common in many parts of West and East Africa and especially in Nigeria. In the novel when Papa- Nnukwu stays in his daughters house offers to tell a native folktale, the children become very interested. Obioro explains “It is better than TV anyway.” (Adichie 157) . At Chima’s request Papa- Nnukwu narrates the story of the tortoise cracking the shell. “Tell us the story of why the tortoise has a cracked shell! Chima piped up.” (Adichie 157).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has been greatly influenced by the grandfather of African Literature Chinua Achebe. In *Things Fall Apart* in chapter 11 Ekwefi narrates to Ezinma the story of how the tortoise cracked his shell. In a conversation with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that she was influenced by Chinua Achebe. The very opening line of the novel of *Purple Hibiscus* ‘Things started falling apart’ displays the measure of influence of Achebe’s writing on Adichie. Both of them shared similar views on Igbo culture.

Nigeria celebrates many Community festivals. Community festivals as Falola writes, are widespread, particularly the yam festival, masquerade ceremonies, and the annual remembrance of ancient Gods. Beliefs in spirits are as strong as ever. The yam festival is very significant to the Nigerians as it is their staple crop. The yam harvest is celebrated as a part of thanksgiving for a good harvest. The Nigerians celebrate it annually and it is the most popular one.

The coming of the Christian missionaries did not decrease the significance of the yam or the harvest celebration. The Christian missionaries, especially the Irish who brought the

Catholic Church to Igbo land, noticed how challenging it was to evangelize the Igbo without marrying some of their cultural observances to Christianity in a syncretic bond. Hence, the Church built some acceptable accommodation with such practices like the observance of the new yam celebration and Ozo title-taking celebration. For the Catholic Church, there have been many instances before, like the Roman feast for the Sun God which was adapted as the Christmas day.

The new yam festival is now taken, more or less as a Christian festival. It is surprising to find a traditional culture being muddled up with a completely alien one. More importance was given for an alien festival that just came half way to Africa because of colonization. Christmas became very popular which overshadowed the native festivals. Long preparations and money was spent on Christmas while the native festivals celebrated by their ancestors lost its essence and was branded as heathen festivals.

“You know our people have no other work at Christmas than to go from house to house,” Aunty Ifeoma said. “But you can’t stay here serving them all day. We should take the children to Abangan for the Aro Festival tomorrow, to look at the mmuo.”

“Eugene will not let the children go to a heathen festival Mama said.

“Heathen festival, kwa? Everybody goes to Aro to look at the mmuo.”

(Adichie 74)

The main language spoken by Igbos is the Igbo language. But with the intervention of Western Education English became wide spread in Nigeria chiefly among the elite. Sources fear that the Igbo language is a language that might become extinct within the next fifty

years. Western Education made the native believe that the language English was way superior. Fight for independence, print and visual media, economics, translation of legal codes were all in English. Africa is a land of multi ethnicity with numerous native languages yet English stood prominent amidst them for the most part in Nigeria. English and power came together. People who were seeking for official jobs spoke English fluently. The impact of the English is traced in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* through the character Papa Eugene who found the language English superior and civilized while he spoke in Igbo only when he wanted to express his anger. He.

Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja. “Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, gbo? Have you no words in your mouth?” he asked entirely in Igbo? He hardly spoke Igbo although Jaja and I spoke at it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we have to speak English. Papa’s sister, Auntie Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. (Adichie 13)

When Papa Eugene visits his native place Abba, one of the village men calls on him. He makes an effort to talk in English with an Igbo language accent. Papa usually adored the village people when they took efforts to speak in English, he felt pleased as he comments that they had good sense. When people spoke to Papa in Igbo he had the habit of replying to them only in English. Adichie keeps reconfirming in the novel that Papa’s way of being superior and civilized is by employing English when speaking to others. Auntie Ifeoma, Papa’s sister is the only one who stood against the eccentric ideas of Papa. She is the only person who is not scared of her brother Eugene. She usually spoke to him in Igbo.

Papa Eugene throughout the novel is portrayed as an adamant, domineering, staunch catholic person while in contrast is his sister Ifeoma who is also a catholic is portrayed soft and also appreciates the traditionalist and their beliefs. When Adichie was questioned by the Image Journalist regarding the character of Eugene being portrayed as a monster, Adichie says “Eugene, for me, was a character who made people suffer, but who also had suffered and who, in a strange way, thinks he’s doing the right thing. I find this interesting: “I’m going to beat you, but it’s for your own good. I’m going to beat goodness into you.” Each time after creating violence in the house Papa Eugene either apologizes or accepts his fault for his rude action, this quality of his makes the readers along with Kambili to forgive him.

Adichie shows how Colonization and Westernization has left the Africans ashamed to talk in their own language. As Papa does, they took pride in speaking English and also created an impression among their own Igbo people that they were the only civilized people. Thus making their people feel inferior. Adichie depicts that this differentiation of language is also being disseminated to their children and grand- children which would lead to the extinction of the Igbo language in a very short period.

The beauty of Igbo culture is hinted in the writings of Adichie. The culture has interesting and touching traditional beliefs. When Papa – Nnukwu meets Kambili and Jaja during the Christmas visit sighs that it is a sign that he was going to meet his ancestors implying indirectly that he was going to die. The belief in signs and symbols are fascinating and common in the Igbo culture. The traditional culture of Nigeria is exceptional and interesting but with the Western influence Nigeria lost its unique traditions. Adichie thus depicts agonizingly the loss of culture in Nigeria in her Novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The mingling

of the western beliefs and western education with the traditional native Igbo beliefs left the native Igbo Nigerians alienated from their own culture.

In the novel *Purple Hibiscus* a little hope is found in preserving the tradition at the end of the novel through the character Amaka. When Father Amadi a white priest requests Amaka to choose a western name for her confirmation, Amaka is stubborn that she will use only an Igbo name and receives an answer from the priest that when Christian missionaries first came to Nigeria found the Igbo names not good enough.

“And have I asked you why?”

“Why do I have to?”

“When the missionaries first came, they didn’t think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized.”(Adichie 272)

The colonizers under the pretense of making the Nigerians modernized introduced Christianity and rules that threatened the Nigerians emotionally and mentally. All these new religion and modernization led to a lot of cultural clashes in Nigeria. In the novel, Amaka supports and protects her culture and stands up for it. She is very firm about her culture and identifies the richness of her culture. She finds fault with the church which was trying to wipe out the traditional culture of the Africans. She in fact takes pride in referring to a few Igbo names which means God and argues with the white priest. Adichie thus gives the readers a hope through the character Amaka that the culture of Igbo will survive and cannot be taken away from them.

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