

Symbolism in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The use of symbol can't be avoided in literature. It is used mostly in poetry. But the novelists also can't avoid its use. Symbol enhances the beauty of a literary work. It also proves the artistic dexterity of a writer. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's first novel *Purple Hibiscus* is based on many issues like the civil war of Nigeria, domestic violence, child exploitation, rigid religion and many more. As Adichie belongs to the Third Generation Writers of Nigeria and reside both in Nigeria and America and shares a common quality with her contemporaries and writes about the hybrid culture. All these issues and structure of the novel she has designed is symbolic. The religious symbol, symbol of flower and tree fills the novel.

Keywords: purple hibiscus, red hibiscus, palm, symbol, figurine, tea, Palm Sunday

Introduction

The novel is filled with many symbols from the beginning till the end. The title of the book itself is a symbol. Then comes the title of each chapter, places, things, person and many more things are symbolic.

So, things should be discussed from the beginning, means from the title itself. *Purple Hibiscus* is the title which is the name of a flower. It grows in Nsukka, in Auntie Ifeoma's garden. It is the experimental flower by Philipa, botany lecturer. Red hibiscus is opposed to it. In the beginning of the novel Kambili has told she could see all red hibiscus around their boundary. So, that red hibiscus is the symbol of the tyranny of his father and the limited scope of the family members. The branches are cut many times by Beatrice to decorate church altar and its flowers are plucked by the visitors still it grows more. Till now flowers in the purple plants have not bloomed. It means time is not proper for liberation. In her level Beatrice has tried many times to reduce the violence of Eugene but has failed. Purple hibiscus is grown in a different place in the garden of a different person. The place and person are free thinkers. So, purple hibiscus grows there. When it is brought to Enugu and nourished by Jaja, it signifies now Eugene's family is not in a mood to tolerate the injustice and physical torture. While taking care of the purple hibiscus plant Auntie Ifeoma tells, it needs less water and dryness. It means it needs a balance. As it is the symbol of freedom of Jaja's family it signifies that a balance is required to fight against cruelty. When it blooms Jaja is the person who sees it first. First viewer is the first agent here in the novel to bring freedom. It is Jaja who first denies the order of his father for going to church. He confesses that he has brought the painting of Papa Nnukwu. Finally, by taking the allegation of his father he protects his mother. He thinks to protect his mother and sister and even the unborn baby all the time before the blooming of purple hibiscus but he is not able to do so. With the blooming of purple hibiscus Jaja is also capable of protecting his family members against the bad days in future.

In this novel the name of two hibiscus plants are mentioned. One is red and the other is purple. When red is common and found everywhere, purple is rare and experimental with its new look and fragrance. Both the brother and sister are

attracted towards this flower which they find in Auntie Ifeoma's house. For both the characters the purple hibiscus stands for freedom. Kambili is the protagonist in the novel as well as the narrator. She is growing up in the novel. So, her development can be symbolically represented with purple hibiscus. In the beginning of the novel he considers his father as God. In the public sphere her father is next to God who is very rich, pious, compassionate and advocates for democracy. For her, the public figure of her father is placed in the private sphere also. In the beginning she does not consider her father's inhuman treatment as torture and never disobeys him. Towards the end of the novel she recognizes the dual face of her father in her mind. She no more wants the love and favour of her father. Her father always tell them to be away from Papa Nnewi, but she brings his painting to home as a token of clinging towards her Igbo culture. In this way we can associate the changes to her with the new breed of hibiscus. It is the symbol of clash of culture which evokes true culture. She is no more ordinary as she was earlier. The person who is not able to speak in the beginning finally maintains the family business and takes care of her mother. Now she is different and self-confident.

Eugene's house is surrounded with high wall and coiled electric wire on its top. They are not able to see the outside world. So, this wall is the symbol of colonialist trapping the natives. The home is the enigma of violence, corruption, in humanity. His choice of school with high walls for his children also reflect his strict rule of discipline.

In the novel each time there is the reference of figurine after Beatrice is beaten up by Eugene. She polishes it after every violent episode. Just like the figurine, Mama is delicate and fragile. So, she is having miscarriage. She even can't fight for her children. The figurine is so dear to her that each time she carries it and polishes it.

The novel is consisted of four chapters: - "Breaking Gods Palm Sunday", "Speaking with our Spirits before Palm Sunday", "The Pieces of Gods after Palm Sunday" and "A Different Silence the Present". Here in the first three chapters palm is common. Palm has a significant role in many cultures. For the Egyptian farmers to know time and calculating months, palm tree is used. The first chapter is the beginning of

the middle of the story. In this chapter the timing is very much symbolic. In Christianity Palm Sunday is celebrated for Christ because He rose again from his death. Redemption is the soul motif of all these activities. In the Palm Sunday episode Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili redeem themselves from the tyranny of Eugene. The activity of placing the palm frond on wall in cross shape is done by Mama in the novel. It is the symbolic episode who acts an agent to give salvation. Later it is Mama who poisons the tea of Eugene and frees her children from his tyranny. In the next Ash Wednesday the palm has to send back to church. If refers that Mama Beatrice waits for an appropriate time to turn Eugene to ash. The beginning title is "Breaking God Palm Sunday" Breaking God here is denial of the image of Eugene as God in the society as well as in the eye of Kambili. It changes in this chapter.

The next chapter "Speaking with Our Spirit before Palm Sunday". In this chapter they could realize their condition. They value their own identity. In "The pieces of God after Palm Sunday" Eugene is murdered. In the first chapter his image has been broken but in this chapter his physical identity is also lost. The last chapter is "A Different Silence the Present" where the sound of God like Eugene is no more heard. At present the silence prevailed in the home is a different one which is not painful and terrifying.

Palm occupies an important position in the life of Papa Nnukwu. In the life of Igbo people palm is just like everything. In the hot climate it grows more and for each and every essential thing it is used. During his stay in Nsukka he misses his world and home where palm is mentioned all the time.

"And so Auntie Ifeoma asked Obiora to spread a mat on the verandah and we all sat and had breakfast with Papa-Nnukwu, listening to him talk about the men who tapped palm trees because the trees gave sour wine after the sun rose. I could tell that he missed the village, that he missed seeing those palm trees the men climbed with a raffia belt encircling them and the tree trunk. 162

He sleeps on the palm mat, his door, roof and even the bathroom door is of palm fronds. The Igbo used to cook in palm oil and they drink the palm wine in all occasion. In this way we can find palm is a symbol of heaven for Papa Nnukwu. Even at a point in the novel, the laughing of auntie Ifeoma and her children is described "like the inside of a cracked palm kernel" (99)

Through certain signs we can trace the development of Kambili. Till she loves her father, everything taste sweet, when her father appreciates her she feels her "mouth were full of melting sugar" (26). After her mother's miscarriage she feels a stale salty taste. The sweet scent of fruits which fills her room all the time is nauseating her after her return from Nsukka. This signifies she is no more under the spell of so called sophistication of her father.

Earlier Kambili waits for a love sip of papa's tea. For her it is her fathers' love. She always wants to have it. But later it is not love sip but burns her tongue. This tea later becomes symbol of colonial mimicry. Mama Beatrice adds poison in it and kills him.

Kambili in the beginning is literally infant when she first reaches Nsukka she is incapable of expressing herself. Sometimes words do not come out of her throat. She feels like a poorly made fufu stuck to her throat. When her father finds

the painting of Papa Nnukwu he beats Kambili a lot. She then protests a lot and lies like a foetus in the womb. In this way she justifies her name Kambili which means "let me live"^[1] The unborn baby in the womb is a symbol of forth coming freedom in their life. Jaja always tells he will protect the baby. But the symbolic freedom is destroyed in the womb by Eugene. He is responsible to snatch away the freedom from their life. When the baby is gone Beatrice alights in a position as mentioned in the novel,

"Her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dumps in town, pulling grimy grimy, torn canvas bags with their life fragments inside." (34)

She has entirely become helpless and no dream and hope is there in her eyes.

The death of the baby destroys the dream of freedom but at the same time this becomes the reason for salvation. Mama says that Eugene broke the table on which they keep the Bible on her belly is the symbolic death of religious faith and the blood splashed on the floor after the miscarriage is symbolic death of Christ for the salvation of mankind.

In two different places two kind of smile has been mentioned, it has two symbolic meaning. In Enugu they hardly smile. But in Nsukka the family of Auntie Ifeoma laughs lot.

"My cousins laughed, and Amaka glanced at Jaja and me, perhaps wondering why we did not laugh too. I wanted to smile, but we were driving past out house just then and the sight of the looming black gates and white walls stiffened my lips." (83)

Silence has two symbolic meaning in the novel. When the first silence symbolizes terror and pain, the final silence is also painful but a new hope and happiness is there. Pain of Jaja's miserable imprisonment and Mama's mental condition and happiness of a better future where Eugene's tyranny does not exist. As mentioned by Karen Bruce^[2] the silence in home and of Kambili, Beatrice and Jaja not only signifies that they are being tortured but the silence of Kambili is a way to resist herself against the oppression of her father.

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