



ANALYSIS OF CULTURE IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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Abstract

A Literary work is a reflection of the culture of the society to which the creator or author belongs. Culture is a combination of beliefs, customs, values, mode of thinking, geography, traditions, literature, art, and behavioral norms in the society. Culture and society are closely connected. Time brings about changes or modifications in culture. Along with change in the society, culture also changes. Analysis of postcolonial texts depicts evidences of cultural transformation. This paper tries to bring out the cultural elements in the postcolonial novel ‘Purple Hibiscus’ written by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Nguzi Adichie. Adichie in her fiction explores the Igbo culture, which is a traditional culture of Africa. Through her characters, Adichie portrays the conflict between old and modern tradition. This paper reveals the efforts of Adichie to protect the traditional Igbo culture through the leading character of Auntie Ifoma. Auntie Ifoma is a representative of Nigerians; her voice is the voice of Nigeria. Just like other postcolonial Countries, Africa was also influenced by the western culture. While modernists welcome changes in the traditional culture, there are others who highlight the negative impact of modernization. Purple Hibiscus is rich with characters who argue for preserving the old society and culture.

Introduction

‘Culture’ refers to the social behavior, and norms found in specific human societies based on the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of the individuals in these groups. The traditional customs and rituals passed on from ages to generations after generations by families and societies become part of the culture of that society. The culture of a specific group or community which share common experiences takes shape by the way its members perceive the world. Specific community or group may be formed on the basis of race, nationality, gender, class,



or religion. The culture of an individual depends on the group to which he is born. The culture of an individual undergoes change, when he becomes part of another group, but he will carry with him, many of the elements of his old culture and his culture becomes a blending of both. In the modern age, all of us are exposed to and influenced by different cultures. The result is that the culture of individuals as well as the societies is constantly undergoing change. In the present day, the age-old customs and rituals are under scrutiny. Many blind beliefs and practices observed as part of culture are being questioned. Many evil customs which were practiced as part of culture of particular societies for long were discontinued. ‘Sati’, one such evil practiced in India for centuries, was prohibited by law.

African Culture

African literature gained popularity in 1950s. African culture is rich and diverse. There are 54 nations in Africa with their own tradition and history. Each of these nations has different culture. Within each country, different tribes have different culture. The art, music, dance forms, literature as well as attire, cuisine and language dialects of each ethnic group clearly show the difference in their cultures. The Igbo people, who are the native of the present-day south-central and south-eastern Nigeria are one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa. Geographically, Niger River divides the Igbo homeland into two sections – eastern (which is the larger of the two) and western section. Igbo culture comprises of archaic practices blended with new elements added into the Igbo culture by cultural evolution as well as outside influence.

Review of the novel, Purple Hibiscus

Chimamanda Adichie is a post-colonial African female writer, who belongs to the Igbo culture. Her African consciousness and commitment is evident in her characters, which are well grounded in their culture. Adichie in Purple Hibiscus displays the powerful influence of the Igbo culture through her characters who are dedicated to uphold the customs and traditions of their people. Adichie’s characters represent Africa’s stance against cultural exploitation; Africans cherish their culture, tradition, norms, values, and cosmology more than anything else.



The novel *Purple Hibiscus* presents characters from mixed cultural backgrounds in Nigeria, which is characteristic of post-colonial environments. Father Benedict is the true representative of the British colonial masters and Papa-Nnukwu, Eugene's father, is the epitome of traditional African religion. In between these two symbolic characters is a very interesting cultural mix: Eugene Achika is a typical representative of acculturated Nigerians, who are so fascinated to the colonial culture that they have discarded African way of life and language; denouncing them as diabolic and uncivilized. Father Amadi is another character, whom Kambili describes as the "... boyish man in an open-neck T-shirt and jeans faded so much I could not tell if they had been black or dark blue"

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie created Auntie Ifeoma in the image of the traditional Igbo woman. She is considered as an embodiment of the Igbo cultural expression. Though she was a well-educated woman, who was trained by the missionaries, she upheld the beliefs and customs of her people; she had high regards for her father, Papa-Nnukwu, who was a traditionalist. Although she did not have a chieftaincy title like her brother, Eugene, she performed the socially ascribed roles to the male gender. To display his self-righteousness, after the death of their father, Eugene suggested a christian burial for their father, but Ifeoma resisted it in the following way:

Auntie Ifeoma got up and started to shout. Her voice was unsteady.

"I will put my dead husbands' grave for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first! Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? Uchugbagi!" Auntie Ifeoma snapped her fingers at Papa; she was throwing a curse at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She made choking sounds as she turned and walked into her bedroom. (*Purple Hibiscus* 186-187). Ifeoma believed that the imported religions, namely Christianity and Islam, did not have the same powerful hold on the people as the traditional religions, so their use as ethical instruments was not effective.

In African rural communities, when men die, their wives, i.e. widows are made to go through certain ordeals in the name of mourning and burial rites in "honour" of their dead



husbands. But Adiche says there are two things for doing such ordeal; one is to get sympathy, another one is to avoid suspicion of relatives. On her husband's death, Aunty Ifeoma, did not lament and escape from her duties like other widows. Instead, she rose up to face challenges and shouldered the responsibility of caring her three children and their aged father. Ifeoma called her sister-in-law 'wife'. This naming of a relative's wife as your wife was an Igbo cultural practice which showed that the wife did not only belong to the husband, but to the whole family.

Aunty Ifeoma raised her children to have faith in the African culture and be proud of it; she taught them African values. Ifeoma taught her children how to speak Igbo language and allowed them to speak it freely. Just like other Igbo women, Ifeoma raised her children in such a way that they could perform their domestic chores independently. This clearly showed her affinity towards their cultural heritage.

Kambili and Jaja did not know how to perform the routine household duties. Even they did not know how to wash plates. Kambili did not know how to cook because her father employed a cook for the family. Amaka taught Kambili, how to cook. It is in Ifeoma's house that Kambili realized human values and the importance of their culture. Eugene did not allow his children to speak Igbo in public places because he wanted his children to be civilized, implying that those who spoke Igbo in public were not civilized. This proves that how he despised his cultural heritage.

Amaka followed the footsteps of her mother in upholding the cultural heritage of her people by refusing to accept an English name during her confirmation. She valued her Igbo name and rejected all the English names suggested to her as her confirmation name. As a result of this she was not confirmed. She did not bother. What was more important to her was maintaining her Igbo (African) identity and cultural assertiveness. Amaka's stance represents Africa's stance against cultural exploitation. Africans have high regard for their cultures, traditions, norms, values and way of life.

The Igbo people are noted for their respect for elders. Eugene was an exception. In Purple Hibiscus, speaking Igbo language is considered as a yardstick for measuring affinity to African (Igbo) culture. By speaking their language, the characters upheld their African traditional values.
