

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

THE IMPACT OF COLONISATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S  
*PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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Article Received: 22/06/2021

Article Accepted: 17/07/2021

Published online: 21/07/2021

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.9.3.12](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.9.3.12)

Abstract

This article seeks to reveal the impact of colonisation on Africa in general and on Nigeria in particular as exhibited by Chimamanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus*. It explores various effects of colonialism concerning culture, language and religion. Issues related to discrimination, white supremacy, linguistic and cultural imperialism are addressed. Also, the diversity of the Nigerians and their traditions is highlighted in *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie criticises the role of the Christian missionaries in obliterating African identity and culture. She exposes the psychological impact of colonisation on the indigenous people of Africa and how such an effect has dislocated the cultural and social bonds.

**Keywords:** colonisation, conflict, cultural imperialism, Igbo, white supremacy.

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian writer, novelist and feminist activist. She is concerned with the exposition of the social, cultural and religious ills in society and their imperfections (Osunbade 2013). Adichie writes about colonialism, which she thinks every African writer does without meaning to. Her *Purple Hibiscus* is about the impact of colonisation on Africa in general and on Nigeria in particular. Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* investigates the psychological impact of colonialism. He shows how colonialism is adopted by the colonized and how the issue of inferiority is inculcated. Fanon indicates that "through the mechanism of racism, black people turn out imitating their oppressors" (Fanon 2008). This is reflected in *Purple Hibiscus* through the character of Eugene.

On the other hand, Hope Lee (2015) notices that Adichie, through her mouthpiece Kambili, wants to convey her views of tolerance and peaceful coexistence and that things often seen in the opposition of each other can exist together in a strange kind of harmony. To him, "Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* is like her other novels: a close look at family dynamics with a particular focus on women and the conflict of Nigerian traditions versus the influences of the British West" (Lee 2015). Adichie attempts to disclose the influence of the Christian missionaries. Western versus African cultures is explored by contrasting the impact of colonisation – its religions, language and customs with traditional cultural values. (Yeibo & Akerele 2015).

Rosemarie Tong (2009) emphasises that the colonial policy is based on master-servant and this, in turn, led to violence, "The relationship between colonised and coloniser is based not on any measure of partnership but rather on the latter's coercion and violence in its dealings with the former" (qtd. in Tong 2009: 226). Likewise, Bill Ashcroft et al (2007) state that the African citizens are mutilated and made absent "by the physical and psychic violence of slavery and colonisation" (176). To them, this colonial violence is forwarded into the current "representations of Africa and Africans in the neo-colonial discourses of the post-colonial world" (Ashcroft et al 2007: 176).

### **Colonialism in *Purple Hibiscus***

Adichie reveals that the policy of some African governments is inspired by colonial power domination through violence. She depicts the brutal violence used by the military forces to repress the voices that call for freedom. In so doing, she presents the terrible incident of the editor of *The Standard* newspaper, which is owned by Eugene, Mr Ade Coker, who was tortured and then killed by a bomb for his anti-government writings. Thus, the soldiers are following the same way of suppressing people who show any opposition or resistance. This indicates that the soldiers are like the coloniser in their brutality. The role of soldiers becomes an imitation of colonial oppression and persecution. This makes Adichie refer to the "Big people in Abuja" who are controlling the government. These 'Big People,' or as Adichie has put it 'Big Men' are representatives and agents of the imperial ambitions in Africa.

Besides the violence caused by harsh cultural norms and traditional values, the majority of Africans have suffered from different types of violence because of colonisation. Sophia Ogwude (2011) states that violence and hostility are due to cultural and ideological conflicts. To her:

The colonial invasion of Africa in the late nineteenth century and the consequent cultural conflict between the colonising power and the colonised other is now a

well-worn theme of the African novel. This cultural conflict was manifested on many fronts. Conversion to the Christian religion with its ripple effects, especially religious intolerance and its often disheartening disavowal of much of our African cultural beliefs and ways that it bred on the part of these new converts, constitute an integral part of this conflict. Significantly, this contact with the imperial power and its attendant conflicts were in part, and to varying degrees, cultural as well as ideological. (1)

In addition, *Purple Hibiscus* represents the violence sprung from the cultural conflict. Ania Loomba (1998) describes colonial violence as epistemic violence that disregards the culture, religion, and ideas of others. She states, "Consequently, colonial violence is understood as including an 'epistemic' aspect, i.e. an attack on the culture, ideas and value systems of the colonised peoples" (54). Likewise, G. Spivak in Morris' *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* discusses "the epistemic violence of imperialism" (Morris 2010:43). According to Spivak, epistemic violence occurs through the marginalisation of certain voices within Western discourses. These voices belong to the 'subaltern' and Said's idea of 'otherness' in *Orientalism* and, hence, this process of othering is a colonial policy.

A significant effect of colonisation on some Africans is reflected upon the character of Eugene, who loathes his own mother tongue, Igbo and speaks only in English. In the novel, he speaks in Igbo only when he is furious. He, thus, forces his family to speak in English only. This epistemic violence makes them live in isolation. Besides, Kambili has mentioned that "Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the Credo and kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not acceptable" (Adichie 4).

Additionally, Adichie demonstrates that linguistic imperialism is an outcome of colonialism. Kambili states that her father becomes happy when he sees the villagers speak in English. He encourages people to speak only in English, claiming that such

behaviour is a sign of etiquette. She says, "Papa liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense" (Adichie 60). Kambili says that when she visits Papa-Nnukwu she could not understand his language due to the influence of the English language, "I understood him a moment or two after he spoke because his dialect was ancient, his speech had none of the anglicised inflections that ours had" (Adichie 64). This reflects the result of linguistic hegemony that prevails the education system in Nigeria and the shrink in the use of the Igbo, which is the mother tongue of the Nigerians, as a consequence.

Thus, Eugene abjures his religious beliefs and converts to the religion of the whites "because British priests refer to Igbo rituals as the devilish superstition of pagans leading the unconverted natives to the gates of Hell" (Baharvand 2016: 44). Baharvan writes:

Eugene trusts the colonisers who insist that renouncement of African traditions is the prerequisite to happiness in both worlds. He forbids his family to speak Igbo at home and warns them against coming into contact with unconverted Nigerians ... As a wealthy man, Eugene Achike feels deeply indebted to the whites who acquainted him with British culture, helped him rise from poverty and converted him to Christianity to save him from the eternal damnation that traditional Igbo religion would lead him to. Rather than pondering on the disastrous economic and cultural consequences of colonialism, he panders to his white masters who deprived him of his history, language and identity. He is grateful to British missionaries for their contribution to his success and reminds Kambili of her chance to be a student in such missionaries. (Baharvand 2016: 44)

Thus, Adichie introduces Eugene as a symbol of cultural imperialism, who prefers and is happy to speak only in English. Kambili points out:

He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilised in public, he told us; we

had to speak English. Papa's sister, Auntie Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. (Adichie 13)

Here, linguistic imperialism makes Eugene believe that speaking English is a sign of civilised people. He has been influenced by Father Benedict, the British Priest, who insists that the Igbo should not be used. Moreover, Amaka tells Father Amadi, "When the missionaries first came, they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptised" (Adichie 272). However, Amaka has refused Father's Amadi request to change her name.

Therefore, Adichie reveals that one of the imperial plans is to make the indigenous people despise their language so that they can embrace another culture easily. The purpose is to change even the names of the newly born babies so that they could be baptised. Besides, she addresses the impact of the white missionaries whose only goal is to convert as many Africans as possible. Kambili says, "The white missionaries brought us their god," Amaka was saying. "Which was the same colour as them, worshipped in their language and packaged in the boxes they made" (Adichie 267). Adichie indicates that the Christian missionaries are preaching Christianity and, through Amaka, she points out that their God is white like them. Therefore, the Christian missionaries have sought to change the culture of the native people by making them learn and use another language other than their mother tongue. This has led to cultural conflict between the indigenous culture and the newly imported one. That is, the Western incursion into Africa results in cultural conflict. The cultural interaction between the imperial West and the indigenous cultures of traditional Africa "led to the vernacularisation of indigenous African languages, a situation which encumbered the African with a deeply-ingrained sense of inferiority complex even to date" (Anyokwu 2011: 80). Therefore, the African people and their cultures underwent a deliberate change during and after colonisation and have been considered inferior in comparison to Western cultures and ideologies (Ukande 2016: 52).

Kambili, furthermore, says that her father tells her that her maternal grandfather “was one of the few who welcomed the missionaries ... he converted most Abba himself. He did things the right way, the way the white people did, not what our people do now” (Adichie 68). Again, Adichie gives another example of the effect of the Christian missionaries, which make the African believe that the White men are better than them. It is another ideology of the colonisers used to create consent in the minds of the colonised. Kambili reveals this fact when she mentions how her father is praising the white people and belittling his people. She says:

That was the problem with our people, Papa told us, our priorities were wrong; we cared too much about huge church buildings and mighty statues. You would never see white people doing that. (Adichie 104)

Kambili, again, points out that cultural imperialism has been spread through foreign white professors. She says that Auntie Ifeoma has said: “I hear that when they first built these houses, some of the white professors—all the professors were white back then—wanted chimneys and fireplaces” (Adichie 131). Also, it is mentioned that in the Western part of Nigeria, the churches and missionaries were rapidly spread out, and by 1966 – 1967, the Igbo people were mostly educated in the foreign education system and were closely associated with the Nigerian power politics (Bhattacharjee & Tripathi 2017: 437).

Along with linguistic imperialism, Adichie refers to another policy of the Christian missionaries to ensure cultural imperialism through the establishment of patriarchal systems, which will enable them to implement their aims. Father Benedict, even in his speech, talks about men as the clients of Christ. He states, “When we let our light shine before men, we are reflecting Christ’s Triumphant Entry” (Adichie 4). He, also, uses the phrase “Big Men,” referring to those holding power in the country or as a reference to men’s superiority over women. Amaka Azuike (2009) examines the effect of the Christian missionaries on the education

system in Africa and how patriarchal ideologies are infused in the education system. She writes:

For instance, when missionaries established the formal educational system in Africa, they did so by infusing some patriarchal ideologies into the educational system, one of which was the belief that boys, rather than girls would benefit more from the school system. (Azuike 2009: 81)

Adichie represents the role of imperialism in changing the minds of its followers, especially men. Men are the target of the Christian missionaries because they need them to enhance the patriarchal ideology. One of the notions that colonial masters have introduced into the education system is that boys are superior to girls and are supposed to lead the family. Therefore, the school system would benefit boys more (Singh 2013: 118).

Rosalind C. Morris (2010) argues “In both cases, the ‘masculine-imperialist’ ideology can be said to produce the need for a masculine-imperialist rescue mission” (3). Hence, Papa Nnukwu declares, “I should not have let him follow those missionaries” (Adichie 83). But his daughter Ifeoma says, “It was not the missionaries. Did I not go to the missionary school, too?” (Adichie 83). Then Papa-Nnukwu says, “But you are a woman. You do not count” (Adichie 83). Here, Papa Nnukwu states that women are discriminated against by the missionaries and that the focus is basically on men not on women. Gloria Fwangyil (2011) notes that the patriarchal ideology is so inculcated in the minds of the Africans. She writes:

In spite of Ifeoma’s efforts towards providing the needs of her family and the old father, Papa Nnukwu tells her that she is a woman and that she does not count. He fails to realise that achievements, whether attained by man or woman, are the same. (Fwangyil 2011: 8)

In the novel, it is mentioned that Eugene’s father sent him with the Christian missionaries that came to Nigeria and that he was among the first generation to come under the influence of the Christian missionaries. Papa Nnukwu expresses

regret for allowing Eugene to follow the missionaries (Adichie 268).

Conversely, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1994) addresses the impact of colonial and neo-colonial education on Africans. He rightly points out that the Africans are exposed to missionary education that kept them away from any sort of literature that may contain revolutionary thoughts such as that of Tolstoy, Balzac or Dickens. He opines, "Even when later novels were introduced in the school libraries, the selection was carefully done so as not to expose the young minds to dangerous, undesirable and unacceptable moral and political influences" (Wa Thiong'o 1994: 69). He, further, calls for opposing patriarchal violence and religious extremism at home. To him, colonial education results in a split personality that contradicts with itself. Reading Wa Thiong'o's excerpt below, one can understand Eugene's personality: Wa Thiong'o states:

Colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one's environment. It starts with a deliberate disassociation of the language of conceptualisation, of thinking, of formal education, of mental development, from the language of daily interaction in home and in the community. It is like separating the mind from the body so that they are occupying two unrelated linguistic spheres in the same person. On a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies. (Wa Thiong'o 1994: 28)

Notwithstanding, the issue of patriarchal oppression is highlighted through the character of Eugene, who subjugates his own family members through constant violence and intimidation (Subba 186). In Eugene, Adichie has created a character who tries to prove how Christian he is by condemning his past. Thus, Adichie represents the impact of colonialism on the people and the misleading teachings of the missionaries. Papa Nnukwu gives an example of the negative effect of colonialism. He says:

I remember the first one that came to Abba, the one they called Fada John. His face was red like palm oil; they say our type of sun does not shine in the white man's land. He had a helper, a man from Nimo called Jude. In the afternoon they gathered the children under the ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion. I did not join them, *kpa*, but I went sometimes to see what they were doing. One day I said to them, Where is this god you worship? They said he was like *Chukwu*, that he was in the sky. I asked then, Who is the person that was killed, the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission? They said he was the son, but that the son and the father are equal. It was then that I knew that the white man was mad. The father and the son are equal? *Tufia!* Do you not see? That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks we are equal. (Adichie 84)

So, due to the influence of the Christian missionaries on Eugene, he denies his father Nnukwu because he has refused to convert to Christianity and insisted on practising his traditional Igbo religion. To Eugene, his father's animistic beliefs are unforgivable. Therefore, any dereliction or failure is a sin that needs purification and penance and the most effective manner to be purified is the severest punishment. He once told his daughter Kambili how he was punished when he sinned. Thus, his punishment to his family is a reflection of his instilled colonial teachings and past sufferings.

Moreover, white supremacy is one of the imperial influences on the colonised nations in Africa. Kambili signifies the issue of white supremacy. She mentions that her maternal grandfather "was very light-skinned, almost albino, and it was said to be one of the reasons the missionaries had liked him. He determinedly spoke English, always, in a heavy Igbo accent" (Adichie 67). She, moreover, describes how the Nigerians used to refer to Father Benedict as their 'new priest' though he has been at St. Agnes for seven years. She says, "even though Father Benedict had been at St. Agnes

for seven years, people still referred to him as ‘our new priest.’ Perhaps they would not have if he had not been white” (Adichie 4). She, also, talks about the influence of “white religious” men (Adichie 46), and that her maternal grandfather used to use “the word *sinner* in every sentence” as a result of the missionary teaching (Adichie 68).

Also, Anthony Chennells (2009) underlines Adichie’s notion of colonised religion “that considers most of that indigenous culture evil” (17). Norah Vawter (2004) in her review of *Purple Hibiscus* argues that schools were for Christians only. She exposes the education policy under colonialism. She states:

In order to go to school, children needed to convert to Christianity, so Eugene and many of his contemporaries did. He takes the teaching so seriously that he condemns all practice of his native religion, and becomes uptight and self-righteous. Religion is everything. Perfection is the goal. He accepts nothing short of perfection from himself or his family. Every time they slip, he punishes them. (Vawter 2004: 1)

Thus, Adichie attacks the role of the missionaries whose main aim is to change the culture and the ideology of the indigenous people of Africa. Kambili gives another example of white supremacy when she mentions what happened with Father Amadi, who is an African Priest. Kambili says:

He hardly even writes about his new life, except for brief anecdotes, such as the old German lady who refuses to shake his hand because she does not think a black man should be her priest. (Adichie 303)

Here, Adichie represents the German lady as an embodiment of the supremacist ideology, which opines that any priest should be a white man, not a black man. Father Amadi belongs to a group of priests, who go to different countries to convert people. Father Amadi told Papa-Nnukwu that they “go to the white man’s land and the black man’s land ... any place that needs a priest” (Adichie 172). Then Papa-Nnukwu replies, “It is good, my son. But you must never lie to them. Never teach them to

disregard their fathers” (Adichie 172). However, according to Father Amadi, they “go mostly to Europe and America, where they are losing priests. So, there is really no indigenous culture to pacify, unfortunately” (Adichie 267).

Adichie, also, criticises the policy of imperial powers in creating crises, making people leave their countries and then complaining about migration. Ifeoma says:

We have not had fuel for three months in Nsukka. I 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. (Adichie 76)

Adichie focuses on another important issue, which is the immigration of the workforce and intellectuals. This is another outcome of imperialism, which propagates that the Western culture, life and politics are better than the African ones. Amaka said, “At least people there get paid when they are supposed to,” and Obiora supports his sister’s claim saying, “And Mom will have her work recognised in America, without any nonsense politics” (Adichie 224). Therefore, Adichie addresses the issue of the immigration of intellectuals, which can be described as intellectual imperialism. Because of the corruption of the government, many teachers, doctors and professors have been leaving the country. Ifeoma’s friend, Chiaku, reveals this truth:

The educated ones leave, the ones with the potential to right the wrongs. They leave the weak behind. The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot resist. Do you not see that it is a cycle? Who will break that cycle? (Adichie 244-5)

On the other hand, Adichie gives an example of the maltreatment the Africans received from the Western embassies, especially the American Embassy. Amaka says, “Haven’t you heard how those American embassy people treat Nigerians? They insult you and call you a liar and on top of it, eh, refuse to give you a visa” (Adichie 263). Also, she mentions one incident in which a lady was humiliated and denied Visa to attend her sister’s

wedding in America. Then, Obiora asked, "Why did they refuse her?" Then his mother tells him:

I don't know. If they are in a good mood, they will give you a visa, if not, they will refuse you. It is what happens when you are worthless in somebody's eyes. We are like footballs that they can kick in any direction they want to. (Adichie 278)

This shows that the Western powers exercise discrimination even in granting Visa to their countries, and they give themselves the right to enter any country without a visa.

### Conclusion

Adichie has addressed various questions concerning colonial and imperial influence. She explores the effects caused by colonial education and culture as well as linguistic imperialism. She exposes the role of colonialism in cultural conflict. She, furthermore, highlights the problem of supremacism and racial discrimination of the African people and their culture. She criticises the role of the Christian missionaries in changing the African identity, culture and language. She is against the colonial and imperial influences, interferences and hegemony. Besides, the impact of the patriarchal system, which is a colonial product, on African women is dealt with in the novel. Adichie's approach in the novel is a culture of peace approach that calls for respecting others' cultures and languages.

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