

# Hopeless Purpose and Purposeless Hope: Dialectics of Colonization and Decolonization in Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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## Abstract

In her novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie, a young Nigerian novelist, gives the readers a glimpse of the terrible life of a teenage girl Kambili whose experience of home mirrors the common people's experience of Nigeria as a nation. Like her home which possesses all the material comforts yet fails to offer true freedom to grow in life, Nigeria is rich in natural resources yet unable to provide better life opportunities to its people. Like Papa who vouches to the high ideals but unleashes tyranny, rulers of Nigeria pay lip service to the welfare state but remain busy in consolidating their own power at the expense of common people. Like Jaja, the youth of Nigeria fume and agitate but cannot bring about the lasting positive change. And finally women, both old and young, like Mama and Kambili continue to suffer like the caged bird. Colonization of mind, like the caged life, becomes so habitual that it not only weakens one's wings but also cripples one's psyche. So when the cage is finally opened, the bird must re-learn flying. This is what decolonizing the mind means—rebuilding faith in one's capacities and oneself. Postcolonial theory claims that personal is political and political is personal. Accordingly, Adichie delineates the political actions through the private act of identity construction of various characters. In an extremely artistic way, she unravels the dialectics of hopeless purpose (colonization as civilizing mission) and purposeless hope (decolonizing the mind) which assumes the form of purple hibiscus.

**Keywords:** Manichean Allegory, double consciousness, decolonizing the mind

The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. (Ngugi 3)

Colonization is a political phenomenon essentially rooted in the economic exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer. But its effects for the colonized are far more extensive and profound. It enslaves not just the body but also the mind and soul of people by constructing the 'Manichean Allegory' (Abdul JanMohamad's term) whereby a binary and implacable discursive opposition between races is produced—white as rational, intelligent, civilized, masculine, powerful, hardworking, dynamic, virtuous, mature and superior; and black as its opposite, irrational, ignorant/emotional, barbaric, feminine, defeated/weak, lazy, static, fallen, immature and therefore inferior. Psychologically, this Manichean Allegory and colonization have wonderful impact on the colonizer (creating superiority complex by magnifying the self image) and equally shattering impact on the colonized (creating inferiority complex by fracturing the whole psyche). The

self versus other consciousness of the colonizer is imposed on the colonized thereby otherizing him/her and turning his/her whole world upside down. The colonized perceives his/her own self as the other, devalues the self, displaces the self, locates the best of the self in an 'other' and being desperately in need of positive self image, takes up the position of colonizer and disowns his/her own colonized self. Known as 'double consciousness', this self-division turns a colonized into his/her own enemy. As a result, even when the colonized achieves political and economic (?) freedom, psychologically, s/he remains enslaved. Therefore in *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o argues that mere physical decolonization is not enough. It is not enough to alter just the socio-economic-political conditions of the colonized; it is also necessary to undo the psychological effects of colonization by defusing the biggest weapon of imperialism 'the cultural bomb' which creates inferiority complex in the colonized. Only when the colonized people decolonize their minds, reclaim their true self and assert their subjectivity (their right as

historical subjects to mould their own destinies), they become truly free.

In her novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamnda Ngozi Adichie, a young Nigerian novelist, depicts this painful struggle of becoming truly free in the everyday life of people in Nigeria after they gained political independence from England and attempted to establish idealized democratic state but failed to do so degenerating into civil war followed by military dictatorship. She gives the readers a glimpse of the terrible life of a teenage girl Kambili whose experience of home mirrors the common people's experience of Nigeria as a nation.

Kambili is a daughter of a rich, generous, hardworking and well-respected but authoritarian Catholic patriarch Eugene (Papa) and his timid but caring wife Beatrice (Mama). One may assume that Kambili and her elder brother Jaja are very lucky to be born to such parents and they seemingly live happy carefree life enjoying all the material comforts out of reach of common Nigerian people. However, in reality, their life is far from happy as both the children along with Mama live in the perpetual fear of Papa who for the slightest of mistakes, exerts cruelest of punishments on them. Though a staunch Christian, he is more concerned with sin than mercy and obliquely more fascinated by Satan than Christ. This may seem strange at the first glance, but at deeper analysis it turns out to be the logical outcome of the Civilizing Mission.

The modern European colonization of the world differed from the earlier 'bandit mode' which was more violent but nonetheless transparent in its self interest, greed and rapacity. In contrast, the new rationalist mode "was pioneered by rationalists, modernists and liberals who argued that imperialism was really the messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world." (Gandhi 15) The white European male colonialists, while plundering the natives and territories of the colonies, fully convinced themselves that they stood on high ethical grounds and it was their moral duty to educate and rehabilitate the savages who were unable to manage and run themselves properly, and thus needed the wisdom and expertise of the colonizer. The colonized nations embraced a set of religious beliefs incongruent and incompatible with those of the colonizer, and consequently, it was God's given duty of the colonizer to bring those stray people to the right path of Christianity. Thus Christian Missionaries were a very much

part of the European colonization of the world and wherever they went they degraded the local religions and cultures as heathen and devilish and by converting people to Christianity alienated them from their own roots. Thus in the colonies, long after political decolonization, Christianity continued to assume the hegemonic role whereby "a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression." (Abrams 151) Frantz Fanon explores this aspect through the lens of psychology in his famous book *Black Skin, White Mask* when he says "For the black man, there is only one destiny and it is white", suggesting that colonization permeates the psyche of the colonized black man to such an extent that he develops an uncontrollable and pathological desire to be the white colonizer. Fanon further investigates the role of language in one's colonization: "To speak...means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (Fanon 17-18). Speaking a European language like French or English means that one accepts, or is coerced into accepting, the collective consciousness of that particular language. He further claims that the whole European collective consciousness has unredeemable racist structure based on the myth of bad nigger. In Europe, the black man is the symbol of evil, torturer, Satan, shadow, dirt (physical as well as moral dirtiness), sin, concretely or symbolically the bad side of character. So when a black man learns a European language, he is subjected to its inherent racism and is thereby colonized.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa is the perfect example of 'black skin, white mask'. He is too much of a colonial product, wholeheartedly adopting white lifestyle including language (English), religion (Christianity), food habit (white wine), financial system (capitalism) and politics (democracy). He has abandoned not only his roots symbolized by local religious practice (chi) but also his real black father, Papa Nnukwu in favor of alien Christianity and its white father in the sky. He says, "My father spent his time worshipping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission." (47) For him Papa Nnukwu symbolizes evil and so he forbids even his children from meeting him. Although he has only two children, too less according to Igbo tradition,

he refuses to take second wife because it would stand for black sexual licentiousness to the white missionaries. Yet it does not forbid him from physically, emotionally and even sexually abusing his wife resulting in her multiple miscarriages. He owns not only many factories, a newspaper, very big houses like palaces, several most expensive cars, TV, stereo and other consumer goods but also his wife and children. He controls each and every aspect of his children's existence handing them down minute to minute schedule of their daily activities. Like a periodical review of profit and loss of his businesses, he also assesses their performance in every examination always insisting on the first rank and treating even the second rank as a colossal failure. For the smallest of mistakes which he considers as sin, he punishes his wife and children with the most severe cruelties like cutting the finger, burning legs with fuming hot water, brutally lashing with the whip, hitting with the furniture, so on and so forth. He is totally oblivious of the fact that the very attempt to root out sin from others through physical violence is itself a sin. In the public sphere, his image is that of a very pious and generous Christian who selflessly helps the needy and fearlessly stands for the truth. But in the private sphere, he turns out to be a devilish criminal mind sadistically enjoying the sufferings of those dependent on him and instilling so much of fear in them that they dare not speak the truth: the truth that, in fact, it is he and not others who is obsessed with sin; the fact that in spite of his conversion to Christianity, he remains the bad nigger—the symbol of evil, torturer, Satan, shadow, dirt (physical as well as moral dirtiness), sin, concretely or symbolically the bad side of character.

His 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' nature, the outcome of his double consciousness, successfully conceals this truth from him, serving as his self-protective mask. As a zealous convert to Christianity, he is a simultaneous member of two opposing groups—first the dominant (white) Christianity and second marginalized black Nigeria. Though the White Missionaries look upon him as the member of second group, he himself takes up the position as the member of first group when he looks at others. In other words, he has internalized alien white gaze and in the process fragmented his psyche in two parts—his one part becomes observer/oppressor while the other becomes observed/oppressed. Then he turns his gaze outward,

becomes the observer/oppressor of other people and thereby protects himself from being observed/ oppressed. He projects his feeling of guilt and shame for being black/heathen on his father, wife and children and thereby assumes the subjectivity of being white. Thus he appropriates the essential elements of (white) manhood such as autonomy, agency and power, control over one's self, family and environment. He is also a typical representative of both bourgeoisie nationalistic middle class and black capitalism who governs the lives of everybody else, with an attitude, a masked will, to buy the whole world in the name of philanthropic and patronizing aid. He displays philanthropy not for any genuine altruistic reason but to give free reign to his desire to exercise absolute power by manipulating people. Pointing out this very fact, Papa Nnukwu says, "Nekenem, look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba and yet at many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries." (83) Even after Papa Nnukwu's death, much to the agony of everybody else, he initially refuses to pay for traditional rituals and insists on the Catholic funeral.

Thus being Christian does not make Papa merciful. Yet it must be noted that his barbaric treatment of his wife and children certainly does not originate in the traditional Igbo culture. As Aunty Ifeoma tells about her dead husband and as Papa Nnukwu's loving and caring relationship with his daughter and grandchildren reveal, Igbo tradition though believes in polygamy, does not necessarily promotes domestic violence. Papa's brand of wife battering and child abuse are the expressions of his frustrated desire to assert his autonomy, agency and power in the public sphere. In spite of his infinite wealth, remarkable charity, devout adherence to the principle of democracy, courageous leadership and defiant challenge to the military dictator Big Oga, he is unable to accomplish his civilizing mission of Nigeria. He tries to compensate for it by the civilizing mission of his family by using the same time tested methods which white Christian Missionaries had used with him. "I committed a sin against my own body once," he said. "And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St. George's came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it." (196) Thus the Civilizing

Mission turns out to be the hopeless purpose as it is the very civilizing mission that makes Papa uncivilized.

bell hooks states, "As the psychology of masculinity in sexist societies teaches men that to acknowledge and express pain negates masculinity and is a symbolic castration, causing pain rather than expressing it restores men's sense of completeness, of wholeness, of masculinity." (hooks 122) The process of restoring Papa's masculinity, damages the very humanity of people around him. The first and foremost person to be irreparably damaged is Mama. Within the home she is one of many subordinate figures to Papa. She is a shadow of a person, weak and extremely dependent woman who can't even protect her own children. She suffers a lot of physical, psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of her husband resulting in her multiple miscarriages; yet she refuses to reveal his devilish nature openly. She tries her level best to conform to his public image of a 'godly man' but when her sufferings cross the limit of her tolerance, instead of separating from him, she poisons him. She also lets her son Jaja to take the blame for murder on himself and go to jail while she uses all the family wealth to make her life comfortable in her own masochistic way.

Jaja wants to protect his mother and sister from Papa's wrath but cannot. Like his mythical namesake the defiant King Jaja of Opobo, he stands for the failed rebellion. King Jaja tried to oppose the British and was therefore permanently exiled to West Indies. Jaja tries to defy his father only to be whipped mercilessly and sacrifices his life for Mama only to be 'Awaiting Trial' indefinitely.

The condition of Kambili is no better. Papa always treated her as a means to feed into his success. She must stand first in the class at any cost or suffer the physical violence. Mama and Papa can never provide her with emotional support. She is also not allowed to develop intimate relation with other people due to extreme fear instilled in her by Papa. She can neither smile at her will, nor speak up what she feels. The brief stay with Auntie Ifeoma's family and amorous attention showered on her by Father Amadi, create hope for happiness in her life. But that hope turns out to be too brief as the larger political forces leave her alone with her mother to mourn. Auntie Ifeoma and her family are compelled to migrate to America, Father Amadi is relocated in Germany, and Jaja is arrested

for murder of Papa. In the end, she has to take the responsibility for Mama and herself but how far she will be capable to do so is still not clear at the end of the novel.

Kambili's home turns out to be the microcosm of Nigerian nation. Like her home which possesses all the material comforts yet fails to offer true freedom to grow in life, Nigeria is rich in natural resources yet unable to provide better life opportunities to its people. Like Papa who vouches to the high ideals but unleashes tyranny, rulers of Nigeria pay lip service to the welfare state but remain busy in consolidating their own power at the expense of common people. Like Jaja, the youth of Nigeria fume and agitate but cannot bring about the lasting positive change. And finally women, both old and young, like Mama and Kambili continue to suffer like the caged bird. At the end of the novel, when only they two are left with both the responsibilities and the resources to take decisions, they silently decline to speak. "There is still so much that we do not say with our voices, that we do not turn into words." (297) Parth Chatterjee rightly points out, nationalist discourse is finally "a discourse about women; women do not speak here." (Chatterjee 133) Colonization of mind like the caged life becomes so habitual that even when the door of cage is opened, the bird does not fly. Too long stay in the cage not only weakens its wings but also cripples its psyche. So when the cage is finally opened, the bird must re-learn flying. This is what decolonizing the mind means—rebuilding faith in one's capacities and oneself.

In this novel, Adichie denounces the destructive, materialistic, individualism which is the hallmark of white patriarchy and which has also filtered in the psyche of African men. Instead, she celebrates constructive, community centred spiritualism of African people epitomized in Auntie Ifeoma. She is a foil to both Mama and Papa. She is a strong woman who after the death of her husband quite confidently raises her children independently. Although not very rich like Papa, she nonetheless nurtures her children in every aspect. She teaches them not only to think independently, interrogate and subvert the authority but also to laugh, sing and enjoy life. She appropriates English, Christianity and western education, finally even migrating to America out of political compulsion but unlike Papa does not disown her father, culture and roots. She also provides a positive role model for Jaja and Kambili.

It was what Auntie Ifeoma did to my cousins, I realized then, setting higher and higher jumps for them in the way she talked to them, in what she expected of them. She did it all the time believing they would scale the rod. And they did. It was different for Jaja and me. We did not scale the rod because we believed we could, we scaled it because we were terrified that we couldn't. (226)

Although Kambili and Jaja are doomed right from the beginning and there is no redemption for them at the end; although the novel is tragic in structure, it is far from pessimistic in essence. Deep beneath all the grief and sorrow for Kambili and Jaja, lays a strong sense of hope, even purposeless hope, in the form of Auntie Ifeoma's children Obiora and Amaka. Unlike Jaja in jail, Obiora is exiled to America. And unlike Kambili, Amara sings, paints and laughs at will. She can voice her thoughts, feelings and opinions openly and fearlessly. Plus she has also inherited the treasure of folktales from Papa Nnukwu and developed good taste in indigenous African musicians who are culturally conscious and have something real to say. Obiora and Amaka too have not achieved the total freedom and in fact have lost something significant—"we don't laugh anymore, she writes, because we don't have the time to laugh, because we don't even see one another. Obiora's letters are the cheeriest and the most irregular. He has a scholarship to a private school where, he says, he is praised and not punished for challenging his teachers." (301)—Yet they continue to struggle for complete decolonization.

Postcolonial theory claims that personal is political and political is personal. Accordingly, in this novel, Adichie delineates the political actions through the private act of identity construction of various characters. In an extremely artistic way, she unravels the dialectics of hopeless purpose (colonization as civilizing mission) and

purposeless hope (decolonizing the mind) which assumes the form of "experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom...a freedom to be, to do." (16) Ultimately in writing *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie epitomizes Alice Walker's assertion about writers and their writing.

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. ...We do it because we care...We care because we know this: the life we save is our own. (Walker 76)

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