

**Symbolism of the colour 'purple' in the novels of Alice Walker's
The Color Purple and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's
Purple Hibiscus.**

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Abstract:

Black women novelists have openly portrayed in their novels experiences of exploitation. Driven by an overriding impulse towards self-assertion, they have succeeded in turning their identity into a source of strength. Striving to have, to do, and to be more, and attempting the formation of an inner drive toward the assertion of selfhood are usually the dominant themes in the works of Black women writers. A constant attempt to bring out the reconciliation of a fragmented self and a synthesis of racial and gender politics is seen in their works. Colours are symbolic of many inexpressible things and are widely used as recurrent motifs in the novels of black women writers. This article attempts to trace the symbolism and significance of the colour *purple* used by Alice Walker and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in their novels, *The Color Purple* and *Purple Hibiscus*, to signify and signal a new awakening and rebirth of their characters.

Key words: womanist, violence, freedom, courage, purple, red, blue.

Introduction

*If purple were nature's choicest hue, instead of blue or green
If valleys flowed with lilac plants, in lieu of Earth's verdant sheen
If skies and clouds and leaves of trees were violet in repose
The world would be a purpled place, with everything that grows.ⁱ*

The colour 'purple' is a much sought after colour as it symbolises many things when compared to any other colour. Purple is a rare colour and its unavailability in nature has given it a special place and significance making it a very expensive and luxurious colour. Purple is a colour of wisdom and good judgement. It also suggests free and liberated ideas, breaking away from the regular expected way of life. “*When I am an old woman I shall wear purple. With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.*”ⁱⁱ goes the writer expressing her defiance and rebellious attitude against the ways she is expected to follow. She foresees her freedom and expects to enjoy the acquired freedom when she grows old by wearing this colour. The colour 'purple' is a nonspectral colour, a beautiful blend of two different shades, red and blue. Purple colour intergrates the characteristics of both these colours and brings out a fine balance of the aggressiveness of red and the calmness of blue. Alice Walker chooses to call and describe her work as purple. “Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender,”ⁱⁱⁱ a definition that celebrates the sensuality and womanist as one who loves “music, dance, the spirit, love and food and roundness, struggle, the Folk, herself. Regardless.” “A woman who appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility....and women's strength.”^{iv} Walker is not just concerned about women but is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire community. The title of her novel, *The Color Purple* emphasizes the richness and her love for the colour 'purple.' In the preface to her novel she mentions, “This color that is always a surprise but everywhere in nature.”^v A colour which suggests the ability to overcome the hardships in life and come out of their oppressive situations triumphantly. It is also a colour which suggests bonding as told by Walker herself, “I bought some beautiful blue-and-red and purple fabric....And, of course, everything was happening.”^{vi} Purple colour has some interesting semblances in the political scenario too. In the 70's purple became the colour of the women's liberation movement and was chosen as a tribute to the suffragette movement. 'The Purple Rain Protest' was part of the struggle against apartheid which eventually lead to the slogan 'The

Purple Shall Govern'. The colour 'purple' symbolises freedom, courage and transformation.

Alice Walker's famous novel, *The Color Purple* is an exclusive piece of work which is seen as a potential source of empowerment for women. Walker stresses the importance of power, power to concretize one's self and realize one's ability to stand independently. It is the story of a victimized, benumbed lost woman who regains her spirit, her speech and transforms into an altogether different personality. Walker presents her protagonist as one who makes an inhospitable male environment amendable to her growth and development. Celie, the protagonist of the novel undergoes a series of changes from a downtrodden, degraded, despised, abused and misused thing to an independent and liberated woman.

From a used and abused woman, celie emerges as an independent, creative business woman. She moves from being ugly duckling to a figuratively beautiful swan. She moves from being Hurston's mule, the beast of burden, to physical and mental declaration of Independence, to a reunion with her children and sister.^{vii}

The colour 'purple' represents all the beautiful and precious things that God has created for his people to appreciate and enjoy in life. Celie had lost all the sense of appreciation for things that surrounded her. She was totally oblivious to the beauties that God had created. Her horrible life practically alienates her from all the good things and defunctions her morally and emotionally. Shug Avery, a singer and lover of Celie's husband acts as a vehicle through whom Celie not only becomes aware of her oppressed condition but is also empowered to address her situation with renewed hope and assurance for a better life. *"I think it pisses God off if you walk by the colour purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it....."*^{viii} Shug teaches Celie that God created the little things like the color 'purple' for his people just to make them happy. She enlightens Celie by saying that God wants us to notice and appreciate his creation. She motivates her to enjoy life which is exactly what God wants us to. Appreciating and enjoying his creation is one way of expressing our love and gratitude to God. Celie's life devoid of any colour is exposed to perceive not just the colour 'purple' but also appreciate the beauties around her. Sensing the existence of the little things that God created and appreciating the colour 'purple' brings about a physical, emotional and spiritual healing for Celie. Celie realizes that she has never truly noticed God's creations. *"not a blade of corn, not the color purple. Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. Now that my eyes opening, I feel like*

a fool.” p.198. Celie also loves to wear purple colour but feels that the colour would'nt suit her. She thinks of purple colour when she goes out for shopping with Kate to buy a dress for herself.

She go with me in the store. I think what color Shug Avery would wear. She like a queen to me so I say to Kate, Somethin purple, maybe little red in it too. But us look an look and no purple. Plenty red but she say, Naw, he won't want to pay for red. Too happy lookin. We got choice of brown, maroon or navy blue. I say blue. (p.24).

But her transformation changes her whole perspective to life. Now that she realises her identity she sets out to fulfill all her heart's desires. Purple colour is a symbol of life, creativity and individual thinking. Celie has her room painted purple and red.

Well, here it is, I say, standing in the door. Everything in my room purple and red cept the floor, that painted bright yellow. She go right to the little purple frog perch on my mantlepiece. p.291

Purple symbolises royalty and piety. It is a combination of the wisdom of blue and the love of red. Celie even imagines Sofia wearing pants one leg red and one leg purple and dancing on the moon. *“I'm busy making pants for Sofia now. One leg be purple, one leg be red. I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon.”p223.* The colour purple also symbolises the indomitable spirit of Sofia who unlike Celie fights for a meaningful existence. She is a woman with strong will power struggling to earn self-respect and dignity. This Amazon like woman represents the plight of the female in rebellion.

she say, All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house. p.42.

Although brutally bruised, mutilated and suppressed Sofia stands as stark contrast to Celie in her efforts to put up with the male dominated world. Walker's red symbolises boldness and passion. Shug dresses in red. Celie makes pants for Shug, *“They soft dark blue jersey with teeny patches of red.”p219.*

*And she dress to kill. She got on a red wool dress and chestful of black beads.
p49looking at Shug's bright black skin in her tight red dress, her feet in little sassy red
shoes. p.77*

Adichie also uses colours to add symbolic meaning to her novel, *Purple Hibiscus* as she tries to present the complexities of life through her characters. Colours like red, blue and purple are used to describe her characters and circumstances which are symbolic of various factors. The title of the novel which talks about the purple colour of the flower suggests a sense of freedom and hope. In *Purple Hibiscus*, red colour symbolises pain, anger and oppression in the Eugene family. Papa Eugene's red satin pyjamas which lents a slightly red shimmer to his eyes, Kambli a fifteen years old teenage girl witnessing blood and unable to get over the colour for a long time, "*The black typed blurred, the letters swimming into one another, and then changed to a bright red, the red of fresh blood.*"^{ix} (p.35) are all associated with the aggressive and rebellious nature reflected and represented by the red hibiscus which often reminds us of the situation at home in Enugu. Unlike in Walker's novel, red symbolises violence and bloodshed which is one of the many themes dealt in Adichie's novel. The Catholic Church which is linked to fire and spiritual awakening, papa's rigid and fanatic adherence to the Catholic principles thereby leading to violent punishment to purge the sinful deeds are suggested by the 'red' hibiscus. Contrary to this blue colour indicates calmness and solitude represented by Father Amadi who was like the blue wind, elusive, and his car which also smelled like him, a clear scent that makes Kambili think of a clear Azure sky. Father Amadi helps Kambili to open up to the world. He teaches her to enjoy the simple things in life just the way Shug does to Celie. Grandfather's stories and the smile on his face, the easy way he threw the molded morsel out toward the garden, and Aunty Ifeoma's cackling, hearty laughter which floated upstairs into the living room, the softness of her body, the wide lapels of her blue, A-line dress smelling of lavender, her home with peeling blue paint, all of which symbolise the positive side of life. 'Purple' hibiscus are rare and require tender care and protection when compared to the red hibiscus which seem to bloom fast. Jaja and Kambili see the purple hibiscus for the first time in Aunty Ifeoma's garden in Nsukka.

"That's a hibiscus, isn't it, Aunty?" Jaja asked, staring at a plant close to the barbed wire fencing. "I didn't know there were purple hibiscuses." Aunty Ifeoma laughed and touched the flower, colored a deep shade of purple that was almost blue. Jaja joined Aunty Ifeoma,

while we stood watching them. "O maka, so beautiful," Jaja said. He was running a finger over a flower petal."p.128.

Both the children become aware of their suppressed lifestyle only after they visit Aunty Ifeoma's place. Like the purple hibiscus they had never known what freedom would be like. For the very first time they taste the sweetness of freedom and transform not just physically but also intellectually. "The normality of the red hibiscuses represents the only life Jaja and Kambili know before they visit their aunt Ifeoma in Nsukka,.... while the "new color that infuses Kambili and Jaja at Aunt Ifeoma's offers an escape from the hues of domestic violence that they have always known."^x Both Jaja and Kambili emerge out of their frustrated, fractured selves to fully bloomed and healed free lives trying to reconnect to their African roots. They learn to socialise, interact more freely and become familiar with the igbo heritage and traditions. Both the children undergo a transformation, their outlook broadens, and they start thinking on their own and take independent decisions. Jaja refusing to go to communion on Palm Sunday and refusing to answer papa's invitation to come to dinner show evident changes in the Eugene household and suggests Jaja's fully bloomed and mature personality. The changing colour from red to purple is a reflection of the change that takes place in Jaja's attitude. Before Palm Sunday, the hibiscus were still startling red and it is only when the purple hibiscus started blooming that changes started in the house. The change in his attitude is related to the purple coloured flower which symbolises freedom not just for Jaja but also gives hope for Kambili to free herself. Kambili recollects,

Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. p.16

Jaja and Kambili ,very quiet children , always so quiet in papa's words learn to utter their feelings more openly with their lips rather than restricting their speech only with their spirits.

"We are going to Nsukka. Kambili and I," I heard him say. I did not hear what Papa said, then I heard Jaja say, "We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow. If Kevin will not take us, we will still go. We will walk if we have to."261.

Jaja and Kambili see the purple hibiscus for the first time in aunt Ifeoma's garden. The 'purple' colour symbolises courage and suggests freedom from their existing situation. They move away from their father's commands and start thinking of freeing themselves from his dominating rules. Infact Kambili learns to speak up from being a quiet girl when she answers back to Amaka *"You don't have to shout, Amaka," I said, finally. I did not know where the calm words had come from.*"So your voice can be this loud, Kambili," she said. P170. She changes from a timid and nervous person to a strong and perseverent one, one whose thoughts moved into imagination when she suffers the horrific attack at the hands of her father suggesting her grit and willpower in coping with pain.

I thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. They still had the metallic smell of Amaka's paint palette. p.211.

The silent and withdrawn teenage girl struggles to find her own identity and voice. Kambili resembles Celie very much in her struggle to voice out her thoughts under the dominance of her father. Although she could not speak against the violent behaviour of her papa ,she quietly rebels against her father. She goes to the extent of copying Jaja by walking behind him placing her feet on the exact spots where he placed his. She evens starts singing the igbo chorus songs. Kambili's maturity and her journey of self-discovery starts from then. A girl who cannot control even the dreams she has made turns out to be strong, confident, and optimistic, supportive of her mother.

"Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon."p.307. Finally everything undergoes a change. "And that was what happened. Perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka--even Papa--and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order."p.209

The children gain their hold to protest and fight for their freedom to live a free life. Jaja is fully bloomed as his purple hibiscus when he finally starts noticing things around as never before. Jaja taking up the blame and going to the prison instead of his mother gives a complete picture of his maturity and a sense of responsibility. In spite of his bad situation he even makes it a point to tell his

mother to tie her scarf properly.

Conclusion:

The novel ends with Kambili making the final statement about planting purple hibiscus which symbolises hope and freedom not just for Jaja from the prison but for the entire family. "*We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple.*"(p.306) Celie too realises her true identity which enables her to extricate herself from her oppressive situation.

In both the novels the colour 'purple' is symbolic of the fact that no matter how desperate the situation seems to be one can always overcome any insurmountable odds to change the situation and make their way out. Both the novels start on a very pessimistic note and end up optimistically. Adichie attempts to give a voice to the African experiences and Walker continues to water her purple petunias.

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