

**Igbo Tradition and Nature: Anthropocentric Reading of
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the issue of shielding the environment through indigenous context or ideas. It portrays the increased rate at which the environment is being destroyed since the arrival of Christianity in Nigeria. It highlights the efficient ways by which people of Igbo protected their environment and thereby makes an attempt to lead a harmonious life with nature. The research reveals the truth that the fullness of human existence on earth cannot be achieved outside a cordial relation to the environment. The paper again advocates that the principles followed by the ancestors to tackle the ecological crisis is still relevant to the modern era. It stresses the inner urge of Adichie to create harmony between nature and human beings for their mutual benefit.

Key Words: Igbo, folk tale, tradition, environment.

The natural environment is closely tied to integral human life, and without it, human life may not be sustained. Survival of human life totally depends on environment which must be

healthy, friendly and prosperous. Without a proper environment man cannot sustain in the earth. Natural environment includes social, religious, linguistic, economic, and other cultural elements. In fact, the distinct understanding of these elements and their relative values can be closely correlated. Thus, in this 21st century, people in various sectors of life are coming to understand the central fact that the natural environment has to be protected and sustained. As this awareness is the need of this hour, it becomes a task to reflect on the ways the Igbo protected their environment. This chapter examines the Igbo people's habits, practices, tradition and values that respect, protect, and foster the flourishing of the natural environment as reflected in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, essayist, poet, playwright, and short story writer. She also writes under the pseudonym Amanda N. Adichie. Regarded as one of Nigeria's most talented young writers, Adichie is acknowledged for her well – crafted stories and novels that explore the political and personal repercussions of recent Nigerian history. Her debut *Purple Hibiscus* is a story of a young girl (Kambili) who tries to find her own voice and speaks out against her violent oppressive father. The novel is a compelling tale told well by a confident voice with much potential for the future. The child's voice also points to the cyclic nature of the violence.

Adichie's novel set in post-colonial Nigerian villages where people are much dependent on the nature. The setting of the novel differs from one rural community to another. In the novel nature is revered, adored, and in some instances abused by the people. The communities have their environmental concepts, natural resources, environment friendly livelihoods, and range of natural and human induced environmental problems. Adichie admires flowers, creepers, trees and insects, and finds some inner meaning in them. She always relates her life with nature and feels oneness with it. Her references to moon, daylight night, sun etc. reflect the different moods of her characters. Her writing inspires to take nature and man as inseparably connected and interdependent.

All ancient cultures celebrate and worship nature. Folk traditions are aware of the primal elements. Their consciousness arises from the fact that human life depends on water, earth, air, fire and above all space. For them “the whole nature is a temple and they worship trees, groves and forests and trees as deities” (Henryk 138). The idea of exploiting nature for their benefit is unimaginable for the Igbos. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Papa-Nnukwu's religion is deeply

Nigerian. It is tied to “Ani, god of the land” (*PH* 65). The earth is a very important element in Nigerian culture. It is regarded as a mother goddess who rules all people and gives birth to new generations of all beings. It is believed that earth conceals life, protecting it from drought and reviving it when the rains come. All creatures on earth cannot live without Her (Nature). She is regarded as a powerful spirit, ruling over life. When angered she brings death, moves mountains and forests.

Igbo people are deeply rooted in their environment and natural elements that they see in their daily life. They connect nature at whatever they see and experience. Even the ordinary common fruits, trees, flower etc. move them so much that the memories of these trivial things are detained in them forever. At Nsukka, Kambili continues to connect Papa-Nnukwu to Nigerian objects. When she watches Papa-Nnukwu pray at Auntie Ifeoma’s house, Kambili immediately begins to compare his body to both Nigerian things and the Nigerian land. His legs have “loose, soil-colored skin” (*PH* 167). She also describes:

His navel has once jutted out, I could tell, But now it looked like a wrinkled eggplant ... His few front teeth seemed a deeper yellow in the light, like a fresh corn kernels ... his entire body is like the bark of the gnarled gmelina tree in our yard, captured the gold shadows from the lamp flame in its many furrows and ridges ... His nipples were like dark raisins. (*PH* 168-69)

Igbo people show high respect for the land they live in. Knowing the fact that healthy environment gives healing life, they preserve their homes and surroundings neatly and safely. Trees are regarded as life giving gods. People of Igbo plant beautiful flowers and enjoy their sweet scent. They spend a lot of time in watering and caring their gardens. They see that their house should be adorned by beautiful garden. Thus Auntie Ifeoma has taken great care to maintain her garden.

According to Olajubu, “traditional ways of life permeate every culture as shown by attitudes towards nature among different peoples at different times and locations” (235). The Igbos are no exception to the above observation, especially during the talk of a religiously influenced environment. The people of Igbo are people of the nature. The village life is determined by the physical environment. Kambili describes, “Papa-Nnukwu’s house had a verandah, which was bounded by rusty metal bars” and his bathroom is “a closet-sized building of unpainted cement blocks with a mat of entwined palm fronds pulled across a gaping entrance”

(PH 63). These lines graphically describe the beauty and wonders of the nature in an environment where there is balance between humans and the natural environment. The scale of house and outhouse partly shows the old man's poverty, which he has clung to rather than "throw away his chi in the thatch shrine in his yard" (PH 61).

'Chi' is sometimes interpreted as 'personal god', but the concept carries with it connotations of individual identity and destiny (Achebe 27). Chi refers to the light and the day in contrast to the dark. Households usually contain a chi shrine which could be focused on a tree. Rusty bars and gaping entrance may signify poverty, but they also allow Papa-Nnukwu's house to be open to and inclusive both of the Igbo pantheon as well as the impoverished community of which the old man is part. By retaining his chi, Papa-Nnukwu has retained contact with the spirituality of his ancestors and through him Kambili is momentarily exposed to the spirits of Igbo traditional religion.

In Nigeria, there are customs, taboos, and superstitions derived from the natural environment, based on the ancestral codes concerning respect for nature and environmental safeguards. This points to interdependence of man and nature and ethics of nonviolence to the natural environment. The harmony between God and spirits (invisible world) and human beings and the rest of creation (visible world) would be ruled "by moral order which is preserved by tradition and, if followed, have the power or force to sustain the existence and operation of the universe, ensuring a bountiful life for humanity" (Magesa 72).

Masquerade is defined as a group of people with masks. The Igbo people see it as a spirit which springs from the soil. The masquerade appears during traditional celebrations and festivals. Auntie Ifeoma takes her children, Papa Nnukwu, Jaja and Kambili to Abagana to watch masquerades. Papa Nnukwu tells them about each masquerade. From him, one understands the historical facts that certain masquerades are not to be looked at by women. When Jaja asks Papa Nnukwu if people carry masquerade, Papa Nnukwu shuns him and tells him that masquerades are spirits and as an uninitiated, he should not participate in discussing the mystery of masquerade.

Adichie incorporates a number of myths and folk tales to establish Igbo people's affinity with nature. The significance of the myth is to establish the harmony that previously exists between man and nature which is a furtherance of the issue that shows men's indebtedness to natural praxis. A myth is a story which is believed to be true and has its origin in the far distant

past history of a people. Abanuka says that: “Myth tells of the super-human experiences of the community, myth exposes the fact that man’s misfortunes on earth as well as his hardships are attributed to the divine commands and moral codes of the deities as appoint in his life” (45). The myths in Adichie’s novel shows that Africans have a culture that recognizes the place of the natural environments including the flora and fauna and they are part of the daily life of the African man. Both live in harmony and tend to communicate to each other.

In *Purple Hibiscus* stories are recounted and narrated through the allegory of animals and birds. Papa-Nnukwu tells the story of how the tortoise has a cracked shell. Adichie’s insight to weave the telling of the story around Papa-Nnukwu represents him as the custodian of the African tradition in the novel. These are the evidences of how their folktales are products of the land and the landscape. Thus, nature shapes the mental make-up of the Igbos which is reflected in the language.

Igbo people are so much obsessed with environment that they have thorough knowledge of the flora and fauna of their surroundings. They use the names of birds, flowers and animals to refer unique qualities. Adichie shows how the language of the Igbo is shaped by the landscape. Being an oral society, people of Igbo use numerous oral devices for effective communication, such as proverbs, sayings, riddles, myths etc. in their conversation. Frequent references to flora and fauna imply the Igbos’ closeness to nature. Proverbs like “You are like a fly blindly following a corpse to the grave” (*PH* 70), “Even lion’s roar was now like the whine of a mouse” (*PH* 156) etc. and numerous others are influenced by their environment. These proverbs simultaneously highlight the fact that Adichie has been able to bend the English language to her Nigerian surroundings and sensitivities.

This paper suggests that by observing some of the inherent lessons in Adichie’s novel, a complementary role of reawakening the public interest toward the environmental stability could be achieved in Nigeria. It also focuses on physical environment and the way it influences the life of the people. Besides it exposes the way Igbo people perceived the environment and thus achieved happy and peaceful life. The chapter highlights how the people of Igbo valued the environment and how much importance they gave to nature and thereby they achieved harmony that is essential for a secure existence in this awful world.

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