

Symbolism in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

One of the central figures in Nigerian literature, Adichie makes herself popular through the publication of her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) which is a highly symbolical novel. The purpose of this paper is to underscore the varied symbolic nuances of different objects used in the novel. The significance of the purple hibiscus plant, references to figurines, the use of palm, the missal, Beatrice's T-shirt, the crawling out of the snail, the earthworm, change of weather, the different colours and above all the section titles add additional meanings to the text. The purple hibiscus symbolises freedom. The colour 'purple' – a combination of red and blue – represents diversity and variety. The hibiscus plant beckons Jaja and Kambili to break the nauseating silence. The rapid blossoming of the hibiscus flower signifies the supreme authority of Papa. The breaking of figurines highlights the fragile state of Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja. The missal stands for Papa who is the fulcrum of the family. Kambili's mother Beatrice spends a little bit of time with the figurines for they are her companions in misfortune. In the novel palms have different connotations. Although palm symbolizes victory, it is also used as a symbol of punishment. Again palm wine is a source of refreshment. The use of symbols, predominantly natural, makes the novel exquisitely extraordinary.

Keywords: Adichie, Symbolism, Purple Hibiscus, Palm, Figurines, Freedom

Introduction

The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977 -) has carved a niche in the minds of her readers through the publication of her three outstanding novels – *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americannah*. Her debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* which was published in 2003 was shortlisted for Orange Prize 2004 and was longlisted for Booker Prize. Her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) for which she won the 2007 Orange Prize for Fiction deals with the Nigerian -Biafran War. Her third novel *Americannah* (2013) is also a superb novel focusing on the themes of race and identity. Apart from these magnificent novels she has also written a collection of short stories – *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009) and a play named *For Love Of Biafra* (1998). As a prolific writer she is greatly indebted to the famous Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe who is often described as the father-figure of Nigerian fiction. Adichie herself acknowledges that reading Achebe gives her a kind of ‘permission’ to unload her thoughts. She has been hailed as ‘the twenty-first century daughter of Chinua Achebe’ by the Washington Post Book World. Adichie’s extraordinary debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* is a symbolic novel. Throughout the novel the authoress uses a rich network of symbols which can help a reader to comprehend the deeper nuances of the novel. The significance of the purple hibiscus plant, repeated references to the figurines, the use of palm, the existence of the earthworm, the presence of the snail, the change of weather, the different colours, the missal and above all the section titles add sauce and lend charm to the varied ramifications of the novel. The aim of this present paper is to delve into the novel and try to find out the connotations that seem to embellish the story.

The Symbolic Meaning of Purple Hibiscus

The title of the novel – *Purple Hibiscus* – conveys a symbolic meaning. The purple hibiscus is a hybrid plant. It is usually found in warm temperate tropical and sub-tropical regions. In the novel the purple hibiscus symbolises freedom and fulfilment. It stands for the inner voice and strength that the characters seek for. It is also a means of augmenting one’s beauty for behind the left ear a hibiscus represents the woman as a ‘desirous lover’. The colour ‘purple’ – a mixture of red and blue – represent diversity and variety, multiplicity and unity. In the novel Eugene Achike (Papa), the father of Kambili and Jaja, takes Jaja to task as he refuses to go to the church and receive communion during mass. It is significant to note that the whole Achike family which consists of four members – Papa (Eugene Achike), Mama (Beatrice),

Kambili and Jaja (Chukwuka Achike) go to Sunday mass to show respect to Catholicism. The family is strictly maintained by the authoritative Papa. All the family members are terribly fearful of Papa's totalitarian regime. Eugene compels the other family members to go to the Sunday mass despite their unwillingness. In turn, he is highly respected and eulogised for his devotion to religion. Being a devout Catholic, Papa, therefore, cannot endure the haughty and arrogant attitude of Jaja. He wants explanation for the usual and unexpected attitude of his only son who represents the pride and hope of the family. But Jaja is importunate. He only says thanks and leaves the place:

Jaja pushed his chair back. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama."

I turned to stare at him. At least he was saying thanks the right way, the way we always did after a meal. But he was also doing what we never did: he was leaving the table Papa had said the prayer after meals. (P.14)

Jaja's audacity suggests his growing maturity. His rebelliousness shows his courage. The truth lies in the fact that Jaja is gradually trying to come out of the dominion of Papa. Kambili's gaze is an expression of her shock as she is not habituated to the bravery shown by her elder brother:

I lay in bed after Mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all: Auntie Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie 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's rebellion is thus synonymous with Auntie Ifeoma's purple hibiscus. Both are rare and are emblematic of freedom. It is this clarion call of freedom to which Jaja responds. The typical hibiscus plant that grows in Auntie Ifeoma's house serves as an objective correlative. Indeed, the purple hibiscus summons Jaja and Kambili to break the horrid silence.

But it is not that the hibiscus is to be found in Auntie Ifeoma's house only. The bushes of hibiscuses are to be found in the vicinity of Kambili's house also. In Enugu, the hometown of the Achike household, the 'vibrant' bushes of hibiscus extended and touched one another as if they were exchanging their petals. The colours of these plants were reddish and the purple plants had begun to outgrow the buds. The narrator Kambili recounts:

The purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds, but most of the flowers were still on the red ones. They seemed to bloom so fast, those red hibiscuses, considering how often visitors plucked them as they walked past to their parked cars. (P. 9)

Thus in Kambili's house it is uncommon to find the purple hibiscus; theirs, in fact, is red. The colour 'red' symbolises pain, anger, action and spiritual awakening. The rapid blooming of the red hibiscuses signifies the dominance of Papa. The cutting of those plants may hint at the futile attempt made by Mama to curb Eugene's authority.

It is only in Auntie Ifeoma's home at Nsukka that Jaja can find the original flower that he cherishes in his heart. He is ecstatic when he discovers the purple hibiscuses -

"See, the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom," Jaja said, as we got out of the car. He was pointing, although I did not need him to. I could see the sleepy, oval-shape buds in the front yard as they swayed in the evening breeze. (P.253)

Like the fragrant flowers, Jaja is also about to blossom. The budding flowers are symbols of new hope, new life. Jaja brings stalks of purple hibiscus from Auntie Ifeoma's house. Auntie Ifeoma who gives Jaja some stalks advises her nephew to look after those stalks. She adds that the stalks might take root only if they are 'watered' at regular intervals. Although the hibiscuses cannot tolerate 'too much water', they also at the same time do not prefer dryness. Likewise, Jaja will have to 'water' his thoughts. Otherwise his noble ideas and optimistic attitude will get rusty. It needs to be sharpened from time to time:

Jaja's eyes shone as he talked about the hibiscuses, as he held them out so I could touch the cold, moist sticks. He had told Papa about them, yet he quickly put them back into the fridge when we heard Papa coming. (P.197)

Although Jaja informs Auntie Ifeoma that the gardener has planted the hibiscus stalks, they are not sure whether they will survive or not. Auntie Ifeoma cannot but laugh when she finds out that Jaja is overwhelmed at the sight of the purple hibiscus. She retorts that her friend Philipia, a lecturer of Botany, does a lot of experimental work with the flower. As Jaja wants to assert himself, he feels the necessity to subvert the autonomy and dictatorship of his father. He must brush aside the obstructions that he sees coming in his way. It is only when he comes in touch with her rebellious, free-minded and peace-loving aunt that he begins to form his own self, thereby questioning the supreme power of the member of the male representative. Auntie Ifeoma's comprehensive outlook towards life and liberal mindedness creates a kind of enthusiasm in Jaja. The teacher teaches the student to raise voice against the oppression, instils a sense of heroism and fortitude, pokes at his submissiveness and most

importantly fires his hidden fuels. The purple hibiscus is an embodiment of Jaja. Although the source of the purple hibiscus is in Nsukka, it is now brought in Enugu. It will also be in Abba as Kambili foreshadows:

We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I'll plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers. (P. 307)

It is also ironical that though Jaja personifies freedom, he is not 'free' at all as he has to go to jail to save his mother from the ensuing imprisonment. But it would be a wrong judgement if one says that he is not free for he voluntarily goes to jail instead of being sent to the bars.

Figurines – Personification of Mama

In the novel the breaking of figurines serves as a potent symbol. The novel opens with a reference to the breaking of figurines:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étagère*. (P. 3)

The breaking of figurines is representative of the fragile state of Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja. The heavy missal – a book containing complete service for the whole year – stands for Papa who is the boss of the family. It is interesting to note that though the missal is intended to hit Jaja, it misses him totally and hits

'the glass *étagère*, which Mama polished often. It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige, finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures to the hard floor and then landed after them. Or rather it landed on their many pieces. (P.7)

Beatrice, Kambili's mother, is so preoccupied with the figurines that she spends some time with the ballet-dancing figurine. She treats them with utmost care. When Kambili expresses her sorrow for the tattered figurines, her mother promptly brushes aside the matter, thereby showing that the breaking of the figurines does not have any effect on her. But what she says is not at all true for a prudent person would easily understand that it is the figurines that give her ease and solace. This accounts for why she spends a little bit of time with the figurines after her husband's inhuman torture. As Daniela Muscat and Stephanie Xerri Agius point out:

Beatrice ironically wears a T-shirt with 'GOD IS LOVE' printed on it and she sets to polishing the figurines which seems to be her way of dealing with the pain. (P.8)

Later on, Kambili realizes that the brutal action of throwing the figurines not only destroys the figurines but also demolishes 'everything'. Andre` Kabore` elucidates:

The “everything” mentioned earlier above is about to do “something” that is deemed to be “too new, too foreign” in family life – to poison Papa and thus get rid of him. Things are going to change. There is no need to replace the figurines but to make sure that no missal will ever be thrown at anything or anybody else.(P.4)

It actually disturbs the sangroid stability of the mother, thereby completely crushing the self. After the miscarriages Beatrice begins to wash the figurines and embraces herself in the centre of the room. She starts at the lowest layer polishing both the shelf and the figurines. Thus the ‘shelf’ and the ‘self’ become synonymous as the figurines offer her shelter. The shattering of the figurines appears to be dangerous and therefore Mama entreats Sisi, the housemaid, to wipe the floor so as to make sure that no ‘dangerous pieces of figurines’ were found scattering on the floor. Thus the figurines stand for the submissiveness and weakness of Mama.

Varied Nuances of Palm Fronds

Apart from the symbolic meanings of hibiscus and figurines, the numerous references to palm fronds are also highly symbolic. Christians use the palm branch to symbolize the triumph of the faithful over the foes. Holding a palm frond symbolises the victory of spirit over flesh. Palm branches were waved at the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. At least three section titles – “Palm Sunday”, “Before Palm Sunday” and “After Palm Sunday” –allude to the use of palm. “Palm Sunday” refers to Jesus Christ’s triumphant entry. It is the day that Jesus is said to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. At the very outset of the novel the readers can find the existence of the fresh palm fronds:

We had just returned from church. Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. (P.3)

Palm is a symbol of peace, triumph and tranquillity. Palm also means solidarity as Kevin, the driver, sticks the green tree branches to the car “lodged above the number plate, so that the demonstrators at Government Square would let us drive past” (P.27).Palm is also a symbol of shelter and Kambili and Jajadiscover that the walls of Papa-Nnukwu’s hut is made of ‘dried palm fronds’ (P.67).Again people drink palm wine for refreshment and contentment. During breakfast Papa-Nnukwu tells the grandchildren about the process of getting palm wine from the palm trees. Palm is also a symbol of punishment as Papa uses palm branch to punish the children.

Conclusion

Thus Adichie's novel abounds in symbols. Basically, Adichie resorts to the world of nature to describe the pleasure and pain, well and woes, laughter and tears of the characters. Whereas the purple hibiscus is a symbol of resistance of violence and the palm fronds are sources of happiness, the figurines represent the fragile state of the Achike family. Actually, the purple hibiscus stands for the freedom of Jaja, Kambili and Mama, the figurines is the alter-ego of Mama and palm tree symbolizes Beatrice's victory over Eugene. But the symbols are also ambiguous for if one can probe into the heart of the matter one will realize that Mama does not emerge victorious. She is still very much like the tattered figurines. Further, there are other objects in the novel that are treated symbolically by the versatile writer. As Daniela Muscat and Stephanie Xerri Agius points out:

Purple Hibiscus is full of various symbols the most significant of which is the purple hibiscus plant which represents the freedom that the various characters, in both the private as well as public spheres, strive for. Kambili also has various dreams throughout the novel which echo her thoughts and emotions and are symbolic in their own way. In addition certain objects such as the figurines, the missal and Beatrice's T-shirt are also representative of underlying issues, whilst the weather, the section titles and the author's use of colour also contribute to making this a highly intricate novel.

When Kambili is taken to a parlour to have her hair plaited, she notices a snail gradually coming out of the basket. Like the snail Kambili is also trying to crawl out of her imprisoned state. After her mother's miscarriage, she sees the print turning red that may hint at her bloody mental condition. Further, weather also assumes a symbolical role. After the death of Ade Coker, the editor of the *The Standard*, there are heavy rains. The novel ends with the expected arrival of the 'new rains' which is connotative of new hope and positive outcome. Thus the novel is a mosaic of rich symbols that makes the novel unique and unitary.

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