

Trauma in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The notion that Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) has received a lot of scholarly attention cannot be over-emphasized. Some of the readings of *Purple Hibiscus* converge around themes that examine the novel as a coming of age (Bildungsroman) tale, a novel on religious bigotry, and a novel that exposes the struggles of a nation and of individuals in the processes of negotiating their identities or their modern selves. Despite the large body of work available on *Purple Hibiscus*, there is very little reading of the novel as a narrative of trauma. This article reads *Purple Hibiscus* as a narrative of trauma with the aim of adding to and extending the conversation on the novel as a trauma narrative. This approach raises a number of inevitable questions, one of which is - what makes a work of

literature a narrative of trauma? In order to identify the situations that are traumatic in Adichie's novel, this article adopts an interpretive method that combines the literary, cultural and psychological. We argue that *Purple Hibiscus* engages with trauma on the familial level through its portrayal of the Achike family members' mental distresses – their being witnesses to and victims of physical and psychological violence within what should have been the comfort and security of family life. Although the individual's traumatic experience embodies larger issues of political and historical trauma in *Purple Hibiscus*, this article is limited to the examination of Adichie's portrayal of the catastrophic effects of oppression and violence on the individual and personal consciousness.

Introduction

Periods of unprecedented social, economic and political changes have made it imperative that writers not only remember the past, but also examine its effects on the present. Indeed, according to Laurie Vickroy, "Testifying to the past has been an urgent task for many fiction writers as they attempt to preserve personal and collective memories from assimilation, repression or misrepresentation" (1). Contemporary literary scholars and critics in their works show a growing awareness of the effects of the past especially, its disorder and oppression. This is made evident in the manner these writers examine the disturbing consequences of the past and its effects on the present in contemporary fiction especially in narratives identified as trauma narratives.

Trauma is defined as "a response to events so overwhelmingly intense that they impair normal

emotional or cognitive responses and bring lasting psychological disruption" (Vickroyix). Indeed, according to Kai Erikson:

Trauma can result from a constellation of life's experiences as well as from a discrete event, from a prolonged exposure to danger as well as from a sudden flash of terror, from a continuing pattern of abuse as well as from a single assault, from a period of attenuation and wearing away as well as from a moment of shock (457).

Situations of trauma elude easy definitions but for this article we simply define trauma narratives as stories which are either fictional or non-fictional that examine traumatic experiences in the life/lives of a character or characters. These narratives cut across diverse artistic, scholarly and testimonial representations. In contemporary times, an array of fictional works reflecting traumatic experiences and the various ways they are represented have appeared in Nigerian literature, especially its prose fiction. The writers of these works expose the psychic cost of colonization, military rule and

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domestic violence in the manner they illuminate the personal and public aspects of trauma. Contemporary Nigerian writers who explore this mode include Chimamanda Adichie (*Purple Hibiscus*, 2003), Chris Abani (*GraceLand*, 2004), Jude Dibia (*Unbridled*, 2007), ElNukoya (*Nine Lives*, 2007), and Chika Unigwe (*On Black Sisters Street*, 2010). These writers engage their readers with a number of interesting social and psychological issues which reveal traumatic traits in their characters some of which we examine in this article through a reading of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is told in the first person by a child and it presents the story of a family as a microcosm of the larger society. Thus, *Purple Hibiscus* is a novel that engages with questions emanating from the familial, social and economic on the one hand and those arising from a complicated, dynamic, and deeply fractured postcolonial society trudging along under the biting tyrannical excesses of military ruler ship on the other hand.

Adichie in this novel examines the gap between the public performance of Eugene Achike and his private irresponsibility. The Achike family is blessed with material wealth, but is tragically under the control and the cruel abuses of a father who has been turned ruthless by a conservative form of Catholicism. Eugene appears to uphold moral standards, as he uses his newspaper *The Standard* to challenge the reign of terror and abuse of power of the military government in the novel. However, his private life is as dictatorial and abusive as the leaders whom he attacks. He constantly ill-treats and physically batters his wife and children causing his family both physical and psychological suffering. Kambili and her brother Jaja visit their Aunt Ifeoma and her family in Nsukka and from this visit embark on a journey of self-discovery and freedom. They discover a brand of Catholicism that is not fanatic; they see that correction does not have to come with physical pain and they are exposed to an expression of love that is not conditional.

The story in *Purple Hibiscus* is told by Kambili, the fifteen-year-old daughter of Eugene Achike. Although the story is told with the voice and in the consciousness of a child, the narration in this novel is not a bildungsroman in the strictest sense of the

term because the novel represents only some seminal characteristics of the bildungsroman, such as the development of an individual identity and the attainment of maturity.

The narration of the story in the novel, especially the beatings and abuse from Eugene, is done with a sense of ordinariness and opaqueness, but Adichie's use of language is graphic and apt. Thus, the way she manipulates language, enhances the cerebral analysis and interpretation of the story and her characters. We read *Purple Hibiscus* as a narrative of trauma because Adichie employs a number of traumatic elements (dissociative symptoms, fragmented identity and thought, and memory) and narrative techniques (interior monologue, and fragmentation) in the story she tells.

The Trauma of Everyday Life

Kambili

Eugene Achike reacts to any act whether real or imagined that constitutes a violation of enforced family rules and routine by physically assaulting the culprit. Instances of this abound in the text such as when Jaja refused to take Holy Communion during mass (Adichie 6), the instance Beatrice did not want to visit the priest after mass because she was nauseous (Adichie 30), and when the Kambili brought the painted picture of her grandfather into the house (Adichie 206). Kambili who describes these incidents to us, does so not only in detail, with a keen perception and a vivid attention to events but also with opaqueness and detachment. Adichie engages in a detailed description of the things Kambili remembers about her family life, and in the process, the most disturbing experience of trauma is constructed and presented to us (Adichie 206). Eugene's expectations of his children especially academically, the schedule that regulates their lives and Eugene's need to be in control and dictatorial in all spheres of family life do not only put pressure on them but have in turn made them social misfits. Because of this they are mentally and physically tortured and this has caused them trauma.

The mental torture is mostly felt by Kambili, especially when she is ranked second in position after an exam in her class. Eugene takes Kambili to school to make the point that the girl Chinwe Jideze who beats her to the first position "has one head too,

she does not have two" (Adichie 46). Eugene's need to be in control and dictatorial in all spheres of family life has made him emotionally cold and unaware of the fact that his home is not a conducive environment for any meaningful academic activity. Kambili, describing the need to excel academically as "a big load", says:

It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my hand. I still saw the print in my textbooks as a red blur, still saw my baby brother's spirit strung together by narrow lines of blood. I memorized what the teachers said because I knew my textbooks would not make sense if I tried to study later. After every test, a tough lump like poorly made fufu formed in my throat and stayed there until our exercise books came back. (Adichie 52)

Adichie here plots her metaphors around visualizations that are a part of Kambili's experiences. These clearly help to present the picture she wants the reader to see. The extent of the pressure on Kambili to excel academically by her father is expressed through the image of a sack of gravel. It is further extended to the lump of fufu stuck in her throat. The experience of schooling for her is therefore like a big load, something that chokes. These metaphors of the sack of gravel and the tough lump of fufu reflect the experience of trauma as possession or haunting, whereby traces of past events resurface in the present. Kambili's body, therefore, becomes a narrative of trauma. The narrative of Kambili's body is concerned with human-made disturbing situations and is an implicit critique of the ways social, economic and political structures create and perpetuate trauma (Vickroy 4).

It is Kambili's narration of incidents which allows us to see that in the Achike household psycho-physical violence is an everyday occurrence. Trauma therefore occurs in the everyday aspects of life in the Achike household. 'Everyday' is used here in view of Michael Featherstone's description of it as "usually associated with the mundane, taken-for-granted, common sense routines which sustain and maintain the fabric of our daily lives" (55).

Furthermore, the everyday does not only consist of a domesticated spectacle of violence but also a curious and connotative subtext of silence on Eugene's family part (Ouma68).

Adichie presents two kinds of silence in *Purple Hibiscus*: the general silence, which exists because the people are unaware that they can speak out against oppression, and the silence that is imposed by the use of intimidation. In her presentation of these two kinds of silence, Adichie reveals the tension between the said and the unsaid, the sayable and the unsayable. These elements of dialogue underscore the notion of trauma in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili describes the silence that permeates the Achike household as "the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch; the silence of reflection time [...]; the silence of evening rosary; the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterwards" (Adichie31).

Kambili shows both a pervasive fear and an awe of her father. Because of this, she internalizes her thoughts and would choke as she tries to speak. We see her body as a presentation of violence and silence and therefore itself a narrative of trauma. According to Heather Hewett, "Kambili's body is a site of critical silence made visible by the constant choking and inadvertent inability to speak at crucial moments" (78). Indeed, her ordinary life is read as a connotation of violence, silence and wounded bodies that illustrate a resigned and traumatized existence. This is made evident by scars, left behind by inflictions of torturous punishments, like her burnt feet, like Jaja's crooked finger and Beatrice's awkward limp, which are forbidden subjects for discussion and permanent signs of the pervasive continuous threat of violence in the Achike household.

In his discussion on Kambili, Christopher Oumastates that "Kambili is quite adept at speaking with a precocious naivety and this [...] allows us to see that her daily life entails a constant witnessing and experience of psycho-physical violence" (67). Eugene's children and wife are subjected to physical trauma and Kambili narrates these beatings and abuse in a matter of fact way. This matter of fact way is the reason Anne Whitehead argues that:

A child is liable to notice details and is not

always able to interpret what is going on around him [...] the limited insight of the child creates a hiatus in the text, which relies on the knowledge or imagination of the reader to fill in the gap and to make sense of the narrative (38).

Although it is noteworthy that Kambili's opacity in her narration does not in any way make the incidents and experiences any less traumatic, it intensifies the experience of trauma. Adichie's presentation of Kambili's trauma goes beyond a surface engagement with trauma as a concept. She shows how Kambili, in the words of Laurie Vickroy, "Internalizes the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of the experience and in the process reveals the many obstacles to communicating the experience: silence, denial, dissociation and repression among others" (3).

Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which is often translated as 'deferred action' or "afterwardness" (Whitehead 6), can be applied to Kambili's reaction to the experience of trauma. The temporally fragmented experience of a traumatic event in its Freudian belatedness (Ouma 69) is reflected in Kambili's reaction to the battering of her mother. When she started to hear the sounds coming from her parents' room, she knew what was happening, but tried to imagine it was something else. She tells us, "If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true" (Adichie 33). The extent of her trauma at the sound of the battering of her mother and the sight of her mother's blood is made evident when the 'red' of her mother's blood takes over everything she sees; the letters in her text book, the startling red hibiscus flower, the church altar which was decorated red, her mother's red wrapper, the priest's red robe (Adichie 52). Everyday for Kambili, as we noted earlier on in this article, consists of an existence defined by torture and trauma.

Jaja

In the same way as Kambili, Jaja is controlled by his father. Like his sister, he is withdrawn and sullen although more outgoing but protective of his sister and mother. The two are not allowed to socialize, and for this reason, they are regarded as snobs. Kambili and Jaja have a special bond that is borne

out of the shared experience of having a man such as Eugene as a father. The ugly truth of their situation cannot be audibly uttered; they are unable to tell their story in words but communicate the severity of their trauma by speaking with their eyes. Jaja like Kambili is a character who exemplifies the social and familial dispossession that results from trauma.

Eugene insists that his children do not speak the Igbo language and do not participate in traditional Igbo rites and ceremonies. He sees everything non-Western as primitive and heathen. His children are therefore alienated from their community and culture. Indeed, their relationship with their grandfather is censored and restricted. But Kambili and Jaja strive to survive in spite of being impaired by isolation and by their father's repetitive actions of violence. In these two we see how "Traumatized children become poignant metaphors and individualized examples of the neglect, exploitation, disempowerment and disavowal of communities and even entire cultures" (Vickroyxv). The narration in the novel begins on the Sunday Jaja refuses to receive Holy Communion during mass. Jaja challenges Eugene's tyranny after spending a holiday at Nsukka with their aunt Ifeoma and her family. It is at Ifeoma's home that Jaja learns to take responsibility and to assert himself. The possibilities he sees in his interactions with his Aunt and her children cause him to regret that he did not take charge of things earlier: "I should have taken care of Mama. Look how Obiora balances Auntie Ifeoma's family on his head, and I am older than he is. I should have taken care of Mama" (p.282).

Jaja's provocation of his father was therefore deliberate and borne out of built-up resentment and a determination to protect his mother and sister. His actions set in motion a series of events that challenge Eugene's patriarchal authority and create a disruption in the family structure. It would appear that Jaja's stance to challenge Eugene's excesses means he has stopped being complicit or cooperating with an abuser. It is noteworthy though that the actions of a victim of trauma cannot be understood by applying normalized thinking. Indeed, the actions of an individual who is under oppression need to be measured or judged beyond fact-based logic.

Beatrice

Beatrice, like her children, is silent and hardly smiles. Kambili says of her, "She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts" (Adichie 20). Beatrice Achike is an insecure woman, one who because of an abusive and repressive marriage feels threatened and is afraid. When Ifeoma tells her to leave Eugene and his abuse she replies, "Where would I go if I left Eugene's house? Tell me where would I go? Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying a bride price?" (Adichie 245). She does not question Eugene's actions, orders or authority; rather, she makes excuses for him and accommodates his excesses. She tells Kambili:

You know after you came and I had miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our umunna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates too [...] but your father stayed with me, with us (Adichie 20).

In making the statement above, Beatrice shows how social, cultural and economic structures or situations can create and perpetuate trauma. Beatrice's experience of trauma in this instance can be seen as a powerful indicator of the oppressive nature of cultural institutions and practices. Beatrice is an anxious and depressed person who lives in constant fear of her husband's cruelty, a person who is cowed into forced obeisance due to her husband's tyrannical control. The abuse she suffers at the hands of Eugene has turned her into a traumatized person. She suffers a series of miscarriages as a result of the beatings she receives from Eugene and she relates one of the incidents, "You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, nne? Your father broke it on my belly [...] my blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes" (Adichie 243).

Beatrice's painful experiences show the impact of trauma within family relations. It shows the extent that trauma can devastate individuals and the resourceful though contingent and restricting

survival responses victims can have to trauma. Pushed to the wall, with the help of her house maid Sisi, she takes the initiative to put an end to Eugene's excesses. She slowly poisons him which results in his undignified death. Given the manner Beatrice chose to deal with her oppression, the question of legacy begs to be asked. What legacy does she pass on to her children, especially Kambili? Geraldine Moane (1999) suggests that "A mother's role in nurturing and socializing her children is compromised when mechanisms of oppressive control such as violence, economic or sexual exploitation and cultural/mythological representations of women all limit her options and rights" (39). Going by Moane's suggestion, what becomes obvious here is that the possibility of the transference of any positive legacy in a situation such as the Achike's is unlikely given that the family is marred by oppression and dispossession that is unrelenting.

Conclusion

We conclude this article by asking a thought-provoking question. As readers of Adichie's novel as a narrative of trauma, do we see her characters survive the devastations that have caused them trauma? The answer to this question lies in Jaja's comments about Ade Coker's daughter's reaction to her father's death: "She will never heal, she may have started talking now, but she will never heal" (Adichie 253). By this remark, it would seem Jaja is not only talking about Ade's daughter but also about himself, Kambili, their mother and every other victim of trauma. Even though the ending of *Purple Hibiscus* suggests that Eugene's death and Jaja's prison term coming to an end mean the past can be resolved and forgotten, nothing is further from the truth. Kambili makes this clear when she says, "there were painfully scattered bits inside me that could never be put back because the places they fit into were gone" (Adichie 282). What is clear from all of this is that incidents of trauma can haunt the victim, making regeneration sometimes impossible even when the issues which caused it cease to exist.

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