



***Purple Hibiscus* and theme of moderation as a metaphor in the evolution of contemporary Nigerian fiction**

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Abstract:

Society and Art have variegated correlative relations in that the artist is, first and foremost, a member of a particular society. As such, his/her creative works are in the main influenced by the events of his/her immediate society or those of the societies that border the artist's. Consequently, the Nigerian society has undergone different developmental stages, and in each era the fiction of the period reflects the dominant incidences of the period used in the work, no doubt, from the artist's perception. Thus, throughout the development of the Nigerian society and the accompanying metamorphoses of its fiction, moderation has assumed metaphorical dimensions due to the fact that at every point two divergent views/forces are at "war" (and by decipherable African thought of obtaining peace through compromise) only a middle course can ensure peaceful co-existence. Hence, amidst the gargantuan religious strife in the contemporary Nigerian society Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie seems to have a solution with the suggestion of moderation in her debut narrative, *Purple Hibiscus*. This paper therefore, uses this novel of Adichie's as a paradigm for the study of the exalted level to which artists have advanced moderation as a metaphor for the advancement of every society. The myriad vexing religious issues of the Nigerian society Adichie so aptly captures in *Purple Hibiscus* therefore, receive a treatment that one considers a model which is relevant for any developing society desirous of unity in diversity.

1. Introduction

The Igbo apothegm *E lewe onu onye eze o di ka o nughị ara nne ya* (If one looks at a king's mouth, it will appear that he didn't suckle his mother) succinctly portrays the present form of fiction in Nigeria. This is because like the king in this proverb, modern day heroes/heroines of fiction oftentimes appear not to have evolved in one way or the other, from the primordial Achebean Okonkwo¹. Like the Soyinkaesque Ogun in Anglophone African drama, Okonkwo first blazed the trail of fictional heroism especially in the continent's fight against colonialism's (imagined and actual) hazardous encroachment on African culture(s). By his decapitation of the white man's messenger ostensibly to stem the tide of the whiteman's successes, Okonkwo anticipated a mass

¹ I have chosen to use the more appropriate Igbo spellings in order to aid in the retrieval of Igbo alphabets from the brink of destruction as is being done in extant Igbo-authored Anglophone African literature. Special attention is paid to the omission of the subscript dot that differentiates the vowel "o" from "o" for instance, in Igbo letters of the alphabet. As a result, the name "Okonkwo" in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has no meaning except if it is written properly—Okonkwo (A man born on *Nkwo* market day). A friend of mine insisted, for instance, that the French word *raison d'être* cannot be *raison d'être* even when including it in an English text. Adichie also makes use of "étàgere" in her work with the correct accent marks, but erroneously renders Ifeoma (good thing), Ifeoma. It is my humble wish that letters of the Igbo alphabet (as well as those of other colonized societies) be accented and dotted appropriately when used in any Western language also just like French words in English texts.



action against Western usurpation of his people's culture from his *Umuofia* kith and kin², but what he gets is a disappointing tumult of fright rather than that of action (Achebe 1956/1977, p. 144-145). With the failure to nip this invasion in the bud therefore, Western culture became "dominant," setting colonized peoples against each other while the colonizer became the bemused umpire. This is the story that another of Achebe's earliest works *Arrow of God*, encapsulates—a narrative in which Wole Soyinka observes that in a bid to win the *Umuaro* people who vehemently opposed his obstinacy, "it would seem that the priest of [Ulu] needed the white man and his religion"³ (1976, p. 90). This is the budding of religious problems in Nigerian fiction and it has continued being topical up to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Soyinka further observes that he has "a genuine feeling of being cheated in [*Arrow of God*, due to] Achebe's own ambiguous stance" (1976, p. 92); meaning that Achebe's inability to take a definite stand against colonialism's threatening acculturation of Africa is unsavory. But Okey Umeh contends that this uncertainty is a function of "the artist's attitude to [balancing] the elements of tradition and change", on the one hand, and "the overwhelming forces of change and modernity", on the other (Umeh 2000, p. 120). In lieu of these divergent views of Achebe's (seeming) ambivalence, it is pertinent that one understands it in the mold of Zoë Wicomb's assertion that colonial "displacement is invariably discussed in terms of ambivalence, in the separation and continual contact between colonizer and colonized ..." (2005, p. 145). Hence, ambivalence could be necessary in transitional situations because the "continual" impact of the influence of colonizer culture on colonized ones. Hence, colonized artists often evolve often syncretic middle courses to ensure the survival of vestiges of their own culture. The implication therefore is that in order to keep faith with their local cultures while taking cognizance of the transitional state of their society, Achebe and his contemporaries successfully charted a balance between two contending cultures. It is their successful appropriation of moderation that indubitably aided the retention of considerable *Africanness* within texts of succeeding novelists including the more recent ones.

2. Separation

Daria Tunca runs an interesting summary of variegated critical views of this novel to arrive at the consensus that "one of *Purple Hibiscus's* most compelling features lies in its nuanced treatment of the notions of freedom and tyranny" (2009, pp. 1-2). It has also been referred to as the "a paradigm for demystifying forms of patriarchal violence" (Udumukwu 2011, p. 184). André Kaboré has an interesting piece about how Adichie's "uses palms, hibiscuses, and figurines as ambivalent symbols whose meanings can give insights into understanding hidden aspects of the novel" (2013, pp. 33-34). Furthermore, there has also been an identification of how "silencing is not only a mechanism or weapon of patriarchal control but of domestic servitude" within the novel (Okuyade 2009, p. 248). This is in relation to how Eugene runs his home with an iron fist to the point that his wife, his children, the maid in their home, his own father and sister either hardly says anything to his face, like those living with him, or does not get the chance to tell him anything, like Papa Nnukwu and Anuty Ifeoma. To counter Eugene's dictatorial and oppressive status, *Purple Hibiscus* is also read as "a feminist work that challenges the dehumanizing tendencies of the menfolk" (Ibeku 2015, p. 426). Ultimately, "[f]amily, religion, politics and tolerance" are the central themes (Tunca 2017, par. 4) in this novel, but more than in her other more recent fictions—*Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, religion is a pivotal preoccupation in her first novel. Somehow, the manner religion affects almost everything and everyone in the narrative is a reflection of the increased religious sensibilities in Nigeria itself where there has been a barrage of intolerance, extremities and outright violence. The catalogue of mayhems, killings, immoralities and other religious absurdities range from the inconclusive *Ogwugwu-Akpu* Okija⁴ shrine saga of 2004 (where innumerable cadavers at varying stages of putridity supposedly killed in retribution by the deity of that shrine, were discovered by law enforcement agents) to the yet-to-abate belligerence of *Boko Haram* and the more recent Fulani Herdspeople militia

² "*Umuofia*" (children of the forest) not Umuofia as Achebe renders it.

³ "*Umuaro*" (children of Aro) not Umuaro; also "*Ulu*" (mud or swamp) not Ulu.

⁴ *Ogwugwu-Akpu* Okija shrine saga was a highly publicized discovery that showed people who go to the shrine to make complaints, and when the person complained about fails to heed the summons of the shrine, he/she will be struck dead by the deity. And by tradition, the person's corpse must not be buried but must be brought to the shrine even by force. The discovery showed that a lot of high-ranking personalities were involved in the act. This showed a high degree of loss of faith the judicial system.



(that became more violent after the 2015 election win of Muhammadu Buhari). As regards *Purple Hibiscus*, and its relation to reality, Adichie posits:

I think that there is a thin line between literary requirements and the need for authenticity in depicting a particular time and place. *I am more interested in authenticity.* [Adebanwi 2004, par. 19; my emphasis]

Perhaps this is indicative of how the work relates to the various sediments of the spate of religious imbroglio which bedvils Nigeria.

There are multiple levels of extreme religious attachments at war with each other in Adichie's narrative: the conservative Catholicism of Eugene Achike, at one end, and the traditionalism of his own father, Papa Nnukwu, at the other; then, at the centre are a medley of beliefs—the atheistic conviction of the impressionable young Jaja, and the religious abstraction of his mother, Beatrice. The religious affiliations of both Jaja and his mother stems from the fact that they are products of the clash between the preceding two, but most especially they are consequent of the oppressiveness inherent in Eugene's rigid interpretation of the Catholic doctrine. There are other splinter religiosities like the moderate beliefs of Auntie Ifeoma⁵ and her daughter, Amaka's; each of which aligns to Eugene's and Papa Nnukwu's respectively—Auntie Ifeoma being a moderate Catholic and Amaka being (what one terms) a tolerant traditionalist. One sees Amaka as a respectful young girl who is Catholic due to her mother's influence. For her lack of enthusiasm at going to America with her family members and her dedication to her art, she is here construed as a young traditionalist who prefers to remain close to her roots. Hence, she is not merely a tolerant Catholic, but an open-minded traditionalist. Also, Father Amadi might be a Catholic priest but like Amaka, his religious moderation is profoundly exemplary and somewhat revolutionary when one compares it to Eugene's brand of Catholicism.

Of all the religious inclinations in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is that of Beatrice that is Adichie's most innovative. It is essentially a product of her husband's zero tolerance for dissenting religious views which is accompanied by multifarious emotional, physical and psychological oppressive tools which he deploys in whipping his "unbelieving" and "uncooperating" family members into line. As such, Beatrice's religious affiliation, though not immediately obvious, has both gendered and power relation connotations. Though her related to Jaja's for the fact that they are both products of Eugene's high-handedness, but unlike Jaja, she progresses beyond atheism into an abstraction, evident in her attachment and veneration of the molded ballet-dancing figures on the glass *étagère* in the sitting room of their Enugu home. Her reverence for these sculpted objects is what mainstream Christianity would consider idolatrous, and if Eugene had entertained the thought of viewing his wife's devotion to the figurines as a religious observance, he would have taken it upon himself to deliver his wife from hell by making her retrace her steps back to piety, the pattern designed solely by his own interpretation. When asked why she exaggerated the religiosity of Eugene in her narrative, Adichie had this to say:

I don't think his religiosity is over-represented ... Neither do I think that the religious fundamentalism in Nigeria is understated. I think it is troublingly overt. *More so because religion in Nigeria has become insular, self-indulgent, self-absorbed, [and] self-congratulatory. Churches spring up day after day while corruption thrives as ever and God becomes the watchman standing behind you while you seek your self-interest at all cost. God loves you more than others ... Kambili's father [has a] character [that can] be seen as a critique of [religious] fundamentalism ...* [2004, par. 6; my emphasis]

Consequently, Eugene epitomizes the form of religious superiority and intolerance within which dissatisfaction incubates, births rebellion and ultimately culminate in violence. Eugene's draconian administration of his household with religion as its main oppressive tool, leaks into his community where he assumes deific proportions in his disposition to life, doling out money and power accompanied with justice and self-righteousness the way that (his assumption of) the Christian God would have had everything done. This is seen in his reporting people who fail to go for Holy Communion to Father Benedict and then prescribing measures to be taken in getting them back to the church (*Purple* 5-6); standing at the front of the church after Mass to shake the hands of people (*Purple* 29) in the way that priests; and the total condemnation of the young guest priest to his parish who broke into Igbo songs while saying Mass (*Purple* 29). His blanket condemnation of Papa Nnukwu, his father, as "Godless" (*Purple* 39) and then barring his children from associating with him (*Purple* 61, 62-63, 66) are also glaring examples of his intolerance. The crux of his atrocities is the manner with

⁵ "Ifeoma" (Good thing) not Ifeoma as Adichie renders it in her novel.



which he dispenses judgement: bathing his children's feet in hot water inside his bathtub for stepping into sin (*Purple* 193-195); an allusion to Jesus' bathing of his apostles' feet with cold water and His telling Simon Peter that if He (Jesus) does not wash his feet, then he (Peter) is not his disciple.⁶ He says that the "white priest at St. Gregory" did it to him when he sinned (*Purple* 196-197), as if that alone justifies this wicked act.

Eugene's despotism and self-arrogation to God-hood through the numerous batteries on his wife, Beatrice (*Purple* 32-33, 190, 248) caused her several miscarriages. But to buttress his supposed infallibility amidst these myriad misdemeanors, rather than show remorse Eugene asks his children to pray for the forgiveness of their mother while the woman is recuperating from one of the forced abortions occasioned by his battery of her (*Purple* 35-36). Perhaps it is because no one challenges him over his ludicrous "sainthood" that he goes ahead to also beat his innocent, docile daughter, Kambili, into stupor just in the ageless Okonkwo manner of not leaving anyone he is beating even in deference to a deity, until his anger is sated (Achebe 1956/1977, p. 21). Also, like Okonkwo, he expects his children to live *his* life of *perfection* and ape him in all he does even in the face of his own insulting disobedience to the precepts of his own father. For instance, he hugs Jaja for being the neatest boy in junior school at one time (*Purple* 22), but earlier on, we are told that he disfigured his left little finger because he failed two questions in Catechism class and, thus, was not named the best in his First Holy Communion class (*Purple* 145). For Kambili, he nearly punishes her for coming second in class for the first time but for Providence. However, he later tells her that he does not spend so much money on her and Jaja to have the children of other people come first in class (*Purple* 38-39). This is his way of stating his preeminence over other parents, and as such, the superiority of his children over those of others. When Kambili eventually comes first the following semester, he does an 180° turn around to tell her that she has fulfilled God's purpose for her life (*Purple* 53). He, thus, tells his children elsewhere that he is doing his very best to give them the best kind of education, the way that his own father failed to do because he was busy "worshiping gods of wood and stone" rather than sending him to school (*Purple* 47). From all this, there is no certain way of proving for or otherwise that by his mentioning God here and his general disposition to life that Eugene was actually referring to the Catholic God, because one is wont to see him as being his own God. This is what can be deduced from his entire dispensing of morality both to himself and to others most especially. What one sees from the preceding examples of Eugene's seeming infallibility is a resolute stance of arrogating himself to "Godhood."

Papa Nnukwu, on his part, is tolerant and has a more forgiving disposition towards both his son and others. But his firmness is shown in his refusal to allow his rich son buy him out of his convictions with promises of more support and acceptance (*Purple* 61), preferring to die wretched. Unlike his own son, he does not condemn Eugene in the presence of his grand children (*Purple* 61-62), but rather keeps his opinions of their father to himself. His being a traditionalist informs his telling Ifeoma, (his daughter) that women do not count in the scheme of things (*Purple* 83), while also rebuking Jaja for speaking about the *mmuo*⁷ like a woman (*Purple* 87). Even with these overtly sexist statements, Adichie still portrays Papa Nnukwu positively as seen in his other sterling qualities: his *itu nzu*⁸ is not as vainglorious and self-righteous as Eugene's prayer for (rather than with) his family (*Purple* 167-169). For his excessive humanism Auntie Ifeoma's describes him as a traditionalist to Kambili, and not a heathen as her father, Eugene, would have her believe (*Purple* 166). A little bit later in the narrative, Kambili observes that after praying the rosary in their house no one smiles whereas Papa Nnukwu smiles graciously whenever he is through with his own version of prayer, *itu nzu* (*Purple* 169). As further proof of his liberal views, Papa Nnukwu advises Father Amadi to always tell his adherents the truth wherever he is, especially as he goes on his missionary work overseas (*Purple* 172). His reception of this priest, the fact that he went out to hear the white man the first time he came to his village with his strange religion and the off-handed, mocking manner in which he tells the tale of how he confronted the proponents of the new religion to his grandchildren are indications of his incredible open-mindedness:

Where is this god that you worship? They said he was like *Chukwu*, that he was in the sky. I asked them then, who is the person that was killed, the person that hangs on the wood outside the mission? They said he was the son, but *the son and the father are equal*. It was then that I knew that the white man was mad. The father and

⁶ Cf. John chapter 13 verses 5 to 15 of *The Holy Bible*.

⁷ "*Mmuo*" (spirit or masquerade) not *mmuo* as Adichie renders it in her novel.

⁸ "*itu nzu*" (literally; throwing the chalk) traditional Igbo equivalent of prayer of declaration of innocence.



the son are equal? [Tufia!⁹] Do you not see? That is why Eugene can disregard me, because he thinks that we are equal. [Purple 84; my emphases]

3. Colonialism and gender

It is noteworthy that Papa Nnukwu's understanding of the white man's religion as sheer madness is analogous to that of Okonkwo's reading of madness in the logic of the existence of a father and a son without a dead or living mother or wife (Achebe 1956/1977, p. 103). Unlike Okonkwo, however, Papa Nnukwu believes in allowing other people to have religious independence but with the condition that they must also possess a social consciousness that will compel them to do their duties by their parents and also tell the truth at all times and to whoever is concerned. Thus Papa Nnukwu differs from Okonkwo whose rigid religious adherence robs him his life, as noted by Obioma Nnaemeka who remarks that it is Okonkwo's abhorrence of middle ground that brought him death (Nnaemeka 1995, p. 99). Hence, Okonkwo's case is rather akin to that of Eugene Achike in *Purple Hibiscus*, especially when one considers the manner in which he meets a gruesome death (not by his own hands like the Achebean hero but) at the hand of his wife of many years whom he has oppressed almost interminably⁹.

Jaja's predisposition to revolt is symbolically tied to the "purple hibiscus" from Auntie Ifeoma's Nsukka garden, and has its parturition from the surreptitious promptings of his aunt [Ifeoma], who tells him: "Being defiant can be good sometimes ... Defiance is like marijuana—it is not a bad thing when it is used right" (*Purple* 144). These admonition of wisdom tallies with Papa Nnukwu's earlier observation of the young man's intelligence where he tells him:

You have spoken well, my son. You are like my father, Ogbuefi Olioke, come back. He spoke with wisdom. (*Purple* 66)

Hence, it is the liberality of Auntie Ifeoma's Nsukka home that actually nurtures and births the seeds of defiance and revolt in Jaja. His almost atheistic belief seems to have also evolved or grown from Obiora's¹⁰ Marxist leanings as well as from the religious persecution that his own father meted out on him and other members of his family. His religious skepticism is obvious from his statement to Kambili when the latter tells him that God works in mysterious ways:

Of course, God does. Look at what he did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son. But have you wondered why? Why does He have to murder his own son so we would be saved? Why didn't He just go ahead and save us? (*Purple* 289)

His hatred for his father's intolerance is also shown in his vow to defend his unborn sibling from their father's brutality (*Purple* 23). The fact that the foetus died while still in the womb after his father has beaten their mother again means that he should have commenced his self-assigned protective role from the point of conception and pregnancy, not after birth (*Purple* 32-33). His failure at this task further embitters and estranges him from his father. Inversely, he is more sympathetic with his mother and his sister, thereby making him to assume scapegoat roles for them at various times to save them from their father's unending punishments. For instance, he claims that he is the one that erred in Kambili's breaking of the Eucharistic fast for her menstrual cramps (*Purple* 100-102); that he is the one who owns the painting of Papa Nnukwu which Kambili brought from Nsukka (*Purple* 208-210); and that he is the one that caused their overstaying at Papa Nnukwu's house at Abba to save his sister (*Purple* 69-70). Ultimately, he helps his mother in packing shards of broken figurines, showing great concern for her welfare: "Careful, Mama, or those pieces will cut your fingers" (*Purple* 8). But for his father and his overarching religiosity, Jaja has nothing but revulsion as captured in the following exchange:

"Jaja, you did not go to communion," Papa said quietly, almost a question. ...
"The wafer gives me bad breath."

⁹ I have chosen to replace "Tufia" with the more appropriate "Tufia!" which is an exclamation of displeasure at seeing, hearing or sensing an abominable act.

¹⁰ "Obiora" (heart of all) not Obiora.



I stared at Jaja ... Papa insisted we call it host because “host” came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness of Christ’s body. “Wafer” was too secular, wafer was what one of Papa’s factories made—chocolate wafer, banana wafer, what people bought their children to give them a treat better than biscuits.

“And the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me,” Jaja said ...

“It is the body of the Lord.” Papa’s voice was low, very low ... “You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that.”

“Then I will die.” Fear had darkened Jaja’s eyes to the colour of coal tar, but he looked Papa in the face now. “Then I will die, Papa.” (*Purple* 6-7)

At this point, Jaja has lost every fear probably because he is tired of being perpetually inadequate in satisfying his father’s insatiable sense of perfection and bizarre definition of religious piety. He is however not able to build up this form of resistance until he had spent time at the home of Auntie Ifeoma where he is not often judged and under pressure to live up to someone else’s expectations of him. Hence, he finds solace in a revolutionary zeal and a religious identification that goes antithetical to everything his father and his God stand for.

Same goes for his mother’s reactionary, but less evident religiosity. Like Jaja’s exteriorized rebellion through the non-attendance to Communion shown in the excerpt above, Beatrice’s interiorized version has an equal catastrophic effect. The *étàgere* and its serene inhabitants had been at the centre of this highly abused woman’s sanity, especially through giving her an outlet for the bottled-up pains that she experiences at the hand of her husband. The time she spends at the *étàgere* communing with the figurines is often solemn and fulfilling. That is why she goes there whenever she is abused by her husband. The moments spent with the lifeless figurines are the only period that she performs any chore which is devoid of her husband’s endorsement. Though one may not claim to be privy to the internal thoughts of Beatrice due to the monofocal narrative technique favored by Adichie in this narrative, the religious dimensions of Beatrice’s devotion to the figurines and the *étàgere* shrine is evident in the manner she insistently asks Kambili to go to her room especially on her return from the hospital after one of the interminable Eugene-induced abortions of her pregnancy (*Purple* 35). This shows that it is a liminal moment of devotion and personal communion with the only objects that stabilize her sanity in her husband’s house. She does not need interference even from a daughter who means well and is concerned about her wellbeing. Furthermore, her religious dedication to these ballet-dancing figurines is buttressed below:

Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time I heard the sounds from their room, like something being banged against the door. Her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs, but I knew she went down stairs ... I would go down to see her standing by the *étàgere* with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. There were never tears on her face. The last time, only two weeks ago ... [with] her swollen eyes ... she rearranged them after she polished them. (*Purple* 9-10)

Here, one sees that it is not the need for cleanliness that prompts this most-abused woman to spend a quarter of an hour on each small ballet-dancing figurine, but what one can identify as meditative worship. It should also be noted that these figurines are not molded religious objects but ballet-dancing figurines—perhaps, that is the reason why Eugene allows them in his home since his personality would never have allowed an *Atìliogwu* dancing figurine or that of *mmonwu*¹¹ any where near his sacrosanct home. One, therefore, supposes that Beatrice has evolved a way of communing with these figurines in a manner that they drain her pains and keep her sanity in spite of whatever her husband does to her. By the time her children go for the infamous hot water feet-washing ordinance by their father (the deific-officiating minister), for instance, Kambili notes that the polishing of the figurines and the *étàgere* has become a daily ritual to her mother (*Purple* 192). Consequently, as abuse increased both for herself and her children, Beatrice intensified her veneration of these objects. Going by specific examples of the unprecedented strength that Beatrice garnered from her devotion, one avers that her eventual triumph over her husband is not an accident, but a deliberate act drawn from the objects that she so reverently adore. Gradually, she starts doing things she had not done before, like summoning the courage to carry Kambili back to her room after their father has concluded carrying out the hot water feet-washing

¹¹ “*Atìliogwu*” (Is talisman added?) is a popular traditional Igbo dance that does not look like ballet in any form. “*Mmonwu*” (Spirit of the dead), name for masquerades in Igbo.



exercise (*Purple* 194-195). This act is a foreboding of the inevitable catastrophic climax of the narrative—the death of the progenitor of the oppressions.

4. Feminist approach

It is rather regrettable that in his execution of his self-arrogated Godly roles, Eugene overreaches himself through tampering with his wife's newfound religious affiliations with the figurines and in that way facilitates his own death. The fact that he dies at the same time as the dictator whom he attacks with his newspaper, *The Standard*, is perhaps the author's way of re-inscribing the fact that tyranny everywhere is evil and that all tyrants have a date with destiny for their death—when the people will awaken and then fulfill the popular Nigerian saying: *One day, monkey go go market ɛ no go return* (One day, the monkey will go for his usual business and will not return). In other words, there is a day that all oppressed people will awaken and pull down all tyrannical structures. Thus, by breaking the figurines with his missal (nay missal—a paraphernalia of his own religion), Eugene infringed on the religious independence of his wife. Suffice it to say that this has telling import on the reason for the numerous incidences of religious violence in Nigeria where people are using the objects of their own religion to abuse others who hold different religious views. This has dire consequences as we can see in what becomes of Eugene when his wife loses her essence, the *raison d'être* of her existence and sanity—the figurines. Subsequently, one can view the incidences of *Purple Hibiscus* as a constellation of variegated contentions that will give birth to more moderate religious associations for the Nigerian populace.

Eugene's action also alludes to that of Achebe's Ezeulu¹² who takes up the roles of his god in *Arrow of God* and, thus, brings for himself and his family, grave repercussions. Eugene gets his in this way: when the missal intended to hit his “blaspheming” son Jaja, fails to accomplish its task, it wrecks a more devastating havoc by the shattering of his wife's shrine and thus the dissolution of her essentialist haven thereby hastening Eugene's own death. One should not be deceived by her outward calm at the time of the shattering of the figurines, because it is really a devastatingly potent calmness; one that gives her husband a false security thereby making him unaware of his impending death. It takes another miscarriage and a visit to Nsukka, the same house that emboldened her son's resistance, by Beatrice herself, for the results of the shattering of the figurines to become manifest in the Achike household. Kambili sees her mother's transformation at this point, correctly, when she reminisces on her mother's fixed smile as if she (her mother) is “possessed by a different demon” (*Purple* 249-250) before she takes them all for the return to Enugu. This is because Beatrice has truly become an entirely transformed person from the moment she loses the figurines to which she has laid bare her heart far as long as her pains have lasted. Her complacency *ab initio* is attributable to the gratitude she thinks she owes her husband for not marrying another woman in spite of her not being a university graduate (*Purple* 20). But it is heart-rending that Beatrice does not acknowledge at the same time that her husband (through his physical assaults on her) is responsible for her not being able to have more children after Kambili. However, her ability to exhibit calmness in the face of all this adversity typifies her simple-mindedness. Her seeming inactivity can then be construed as an exhibition of patience to see if her husband will change and turn a new leaf by awakening to the pain that he is causing his household—a situation that has made her to be more attune with the figurines than she is with her husband's nauseating interpretation of Catholicism. But this never happened. Hence, these lifeless figurines hold more relevance to her than the Catholic God of her husband and the pantheon saints and mediators that he has usurped and supplanted with his wicked re-definitions of them. It is, therefore, the chasm that her rejection of them creates in her that these majestic ballet-dancing figurines and their hallowed shrine of an *étàgere* filled, with their overt serenity, calmness and graciousness.

The shattering of the figurines with the missal brought about a dissipation of hope for her husband to come to a realization of the hurt he was causing and have a change of heart. Their breaking irreversibly broke something within Beatrice and brought a dissolution of whatever remaining piece of thread that is holding the family together. Ogaga Okuyade puts it more succinctly:

His missal, which is supposed to be sacred, judging from his parochial sense of religion, becomes a missile which he throws at Jaja, thereby destroying the figurines on the *etager*. This scene sums up the entire narrative. As the figurines go down, the foundation of his family begins to crumble and everything about him begins

¹² *Ezeulu* (priest of the god of the swamps), rather than Achebe's *Ezeulu*, which could mean something else in various Igbo dialects.



to have a downward trajectory. The shards of the figurines represent the gradual disintegration of his authority in his home and the gradual fragmentation of the organic and psychological wholeness of his family. (2009, p. 254).

With the destruction of everything that held them as a family, there was nothing else left for her to do than to run to Nsukka after her discharge from the hospital where she was taken to after yet another episode of battery. At this point, there were no figurines to run to because they have been destroyed by her husband. Thus, the only calming effect on her own ability to avenge has been obliterated. But even with her harmless exterior, Beatrice conceived and executed the poisoning of her husband through the tea he takes everyday. Consequently, Adichie shows here that extremity in one's exercise of religious freedom is one of the shortest routes to crisis and the dissolution of social order. What if Eugene had been more tolerant? There is no doubting the kind of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence that the Achike household would have—Beatrice's and Jaja's own extremities would not have evolved. Perhaps, Jaja would have developed into Amaka's model of tolerant religious inclination. It is obvious from the concluding part of the novel that even with the demise of Eugene; the remnants of the Achike household fail to find peace. Beatrice herself relapses into a strange psychological state that none of her children could grasp perhaps because she finds it hard to comprehend life after the dissolution of her ballet-dancing figurines; the same can be said about Jaja too. It will take one that is conversant with the dehumanizing state of Nigerian "corrective facilities" to fully appreciate what Jaja has gone through with his incarceration or rather, detention for three years.

Furthermore, it is also due to the metaphorical dimension of the breaking of the figurines (Beatrice's gods) perhaps, that Adichie chose to title the first of the three parts of her narrative "Breaking gods" (*Purple* 1) and the final part "The pieces of gods" (*Purple* 255). It is also a means of underscoring and identifying the broken pieces of the shattered figurines as the causal agents of Eugene's tragic comeuppance. Beatrice, perhaps, could not have summoned the courage to murder her husband if not for the pains that the pieces of her gods/goddesses—the figurines—bring to her heart. This shattering of her refuge (the inhabitants of her shrine of an *ètàgere*) dredges an abyss of hopelessness in her; one that is as big as the yawning void that Kambili perceives in their living room with the removal of the *ètàgere* from its place (*Purple* 288). At the discovery of the poison in her husband's body through an autopsy, therefore, Beatrice maintains a remorseless mien as she confesses to her children that she is responsible for their father's death (*Purple* 290) with the deceptive calmness of one who has become completely disillusioned about life and living itself. The atheistic Jaja then steps into his almost perpetual Christ-like role of being the universal fall-guy, by owning up to a crime he did not commit in order to keep his mother away from the hangman's noose and from jail (*Purple* 295-307). He plunges into this role in spite of his critique of God for not just saving the world by a mere wave of hand rather than crucifying his son in the process.

In the final analysis, the events of this narrative show that it is the moderation of the trio of Auntie Ifeoma, Amaka and Father Amadi that the author desires to pass on as a central lesson for mutual respect and coexistence for the different religious and ideological leanings that breed confrontation and crisis in today's world. These three are imbued with an overabundance of moderation, temperance, tolerance and positive compromise to further the original African belief in diplomacy and compromise which is reiterated in this Igbo saying: *Ihe na-aka mma n'agbata abụọ* (Things are better when there is moderation). In other words, rather than holding tenaciously to one's own convictions, thereby, dissipating energies in wanton disputations, effort should be put in the evolution of moderate standpoints to forestall the escalation of disputes on the reiteration of self-centered viewpoints. On her own part, Adichie opines in one of the many interviews she has granted that,

I AM Catholic. It is an identity that, although I didn't have much of a choice in, I have since taken ownership of. I am very much a Vatican II enthusiast, and think that the Church should make some more changes on a number of issues. (Adebanwi 2004, par. 17)

One point that stands out from this statement is that, she did not have much of a choice in her becoming a Catholic. The same can be said also for a large number of people in the world today where a lot of people are immured in the religion of their parents, friends, community and even environment, yet people kill and maim others for not belonging to their inherited religion. The import of this, for instance, is that some people are Christians because they were born in Christian locations and to Christian parents; same goes for people



from other religions. Though Eugene does not necessarily follow his father's religion and Papa Nnukwu never berated him for taking his own path, he allowed neither his wife nor his children anything close to the level of freedom his own father gave him. Rather than being tolerant and taking cognizance of the fact that people differ in their religious and ideological proclivities, Eugene decides to be a dispenser of justice of sorts for both his family and other parishoners. Apart from being impatient with people and misjudging their intentions, Eugene sees himself as an epitome of moral rectitude; and because he is rich enough to command it, people deferred to him in outstanding ways. The fact that his recalcitrance eventually leads him to the *cul-de-sac* of his own annihilation, intensifies the necessity of moderation in ensuring peaceful coexistence amongst people of diverse opinions and views. Most extravagantly, Adichie is able to convincingly convey a very cogent reality of what eventually becomes of oppressive power structures—they breed dissent; and the higher the suppression, the greater the counter comeuppance for all involved.

6. Concluding remarks

At the beginning of the narrative, it is almost inconceivable that the very docile, good-natured Mama, Kam-bili's mother, would ever acquire the courage to poison her husband's tea. Even at the peak of her revolt, she could only muster the kind of resistance that is seething most evocatively beneath a very serene and calm surface. It is this form of protest which comes like a chick with unruffled feathers that gives autocrats a false sense of security in their consolation that their victims have been whipped into docility. Eugene would never have imagined that the same woman he could move against her own will and at the detriment of her health would ever dare to do something inimical to his health or even his life. The unheeded words of Anikwenwa, the one he threw out of his house in the village for being an idol worshiper, comes to mind as one reminisces on Eugene's eventual demise:

“[Ifukwa gi]! You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave!” (Purple 70)

Anikwenwa demanded respect by reminding him that he is his father's agemate. For a man who has no respect for his own father, he is in no way ruffled by these deep words of wisdom derived from the Igbo proverb: “The fly that has no one to advise it, follows the corpse into the grave.” Anikwenwa is Adichie's sense of reason at this point; rightly admonishing Eugene to retrace his steps and change his ways. This short scene shows the entirety judgemental and abrasive nature: he does not wait to even hear the old man out, his only reason being that Anikwenwa is an idol worshiper—an indication that he has not regard for age so long as the person concerned does not exhibit the kind of character he adjudges to be right; he then asks him to be taken out of his house; and then he spares no time to ponder on the parting words of this old man. A more moderate fellow would have listened, and most importantly, less reactionary. If he had been more tolerant, may be he would have been more sensitive to Jaja's angst, then he would not have thrown the missal at him, the figurines would not have been broken, and perhaps he would have lived a little longer. But we know what they say about beggars, wishes and horses; oppressors who are set in their ways are mostly irredeemable.

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