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Adolescent Anguish and Anticipation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

The fledgling Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* as a coming-of-age novel portrays the sufferings and expectations of the innocent childhood. As a parent every father and mother are supposed to nurture their children with utmost love and protection. Adichie, who has been a privileged child, records the woes of Kambili and Jaja who suffer under the strict rule of their father Eugene, a religious fanatic. The children are most often punished for walking in the path of ungodly. Whereas Kambili's aunt Ifeoma manages to bring her children with love and order, she is unlike her brother. Kambili admires her aunt and cousins and long to live a life without the interruption of her father's principles and punishments. The article records the moments of Kambili and Jaja enduring pain, their defiance and urge to fly out.

Keywords

Adolescent Anguish; Anticipation; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; *Purple Hibiscus*.

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The attitudes and desires of children are sometimes the imposed unwanted wishes on them. Those are the results of the compelling experiences that agitate the young minds being observed from the peer groups. Parents who ignore their children and fail to understand their emotions lead them to pitiable plight. The unprivileged face difficulties in integrating with the society and stand desolate. In such cases, parents are the sole destructors who once uncared to set right the difference of opinions between them and the children. Liberty to communicate successfully within the family members develops opportunities for free communication outside the home. When a homemaker fails to stimulate effective communication within the family it results in subsidiary behaviour. Parents set the time for every activity of their children from early morning to night. But the time schedule should be altered to the wish of children when they grow up. If pressurized to follow a constrained schedule of their parents they might rebel after a period. A comfortable home is where health, wealth, aims, achievements, likes, dislikes, love, art, religion and education are gifted to and not forced upon children. Only such homes become successful in providing a valuable citizen to the nation with developed human nature of intelligence, adaptability, perseverance and self-management.

The patriarchal home of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* suffers under the strict rule of a sanctimonious believer. He afflicts his family by subjecting them in the name of God, the wife and children of the patriarch who obey him begin to defend owing to the intolerable punishments. Schedule, in the life of Kambili becomes an unavoidable course of action. Students alone have their time-tables to be followed at the educational institutions, but the children of Eugene have a schedule at home too. Kambili is subverted by the draconian routines imposed by her domineering father. He draws up a

schedule for the children who have allocation of time for study, siesta, family time, eating, prayer and sleep that is revised often; he has hanged a menu on the kitchen which is changed twice a month. He expects the people at home to follow the order even in his absence and off from house.

Eugene explains Ade Coker that his children are unlike others “They are not like those loud children people are raising these days, with no home training and no fear of God” (58). He trains his children to be disciplined, respectful and in the ways of God but for letting them to grow with their esteemed self. Something consistently coerces them not even allowing to express their happiness and illness. The lack of exposure to the outer world and the nursing at home crafts turned Kambili to be a golden bird in a cage, every word of her father valued for her. But her brother Jaja turns defiant and wishes to do what he likes and abstains from what he dislikes.

Every parent motivates their children to excel in studies, games and other sorts of competitions. But Eugene does not encourage, instead he obliges Kambili and Jaja to be first in their studies. Adhering to their father’s ordinance the children excel at school only in their academics, in the rest of the activities at school grounds and other places they are withdrawn and dull. Kambili’s fear for her father does not allow her to socialize with other girls in her class and they assume her to be condescending. She is unable to create her own identity at school as she could not participate in any of the extra-curricular activities. Kambili’s form mistress, Sister Clara and Principal Mother Lucy finds her to be brilliant, calm, conscientious and obedient while she remains a ‘backyard snob’ for her classmates.

The rigid life designed by her father suppresses her and whenever she tries to converse with someone else, she stutters. Kambili decides to acknowledge her failure to her father but her lips could not utter what she thinks. She worries much about her studies rather than being a backyard snob at class. Kambili who constantly comes first secures second place and she

panics about her father's reaction to her report card. It hurts as she could not make her father proud. In spite of being second in her class she is distraught that she is 'stained by failure'. Every single mark bothers Eugene and even a decrease of one or two marks in any of the subjects annoys him. Eugene insists that when a person is provided with more than enough, much more is also expected from him. It is because of the fear for her father Kambili urinates and she realizes some bodily changes in her, stomach made rumbling sounds and the legs feel joint-free as of a wood.

Eugene's paternal love is overshadowed by his adherence to Catholicism. The patriarchal power of Eugene is evidenced through the aggressive acts consigned against the family. He uses punishment as a tool to tame his family when they fail to walk in his path of modesty. Eugene, a devout catholic is incensed by his son Jaja who fails to go to church on Palm Sunday and receive communion. The hospitalization of his mother and sister drives him to quietly turn a rebel against the authority of his father. Jaja does not like the priest touching his mouth, moreover the smell of the wafer provided, nauseates him. As Eugene does not consider it as a reasonable excuse for Jaja to be absent for communion and believes the priest's body to be the Lord's, he admonishes Jaja that not receiving the Lord is like attaining death. But Jaja fearfully replies, "Then I will die, Papa" (7) the words that expose his strong resistance towards the convention followed.

Here the true love of the child for his father diminishes, frightfulness and distrust develops in his mind. Though Jaja is aware that his father would not acknowledge such a disgracing attitude from his family members, he commits it because of his aversion. In disgust Eugene throws his heavy missal at Jaja which misses him and breaks the figurines of his wife. Beatrice, Jaja and Eugene return to their routine life immediately after the abusive attack which jolts Kambili, "Why were they acting so normal, Jaja and Mama, as if they did not know what had just happened?" (8). In actual fact their physical organs

alone function to harmonize the situation, but the wounded soul leans back mourning the aggression. Kambili, the daughter of a pious devotee is dominated by him in every action and as a result the girl has lost her intimacy even with her mother. She wishes to say that she is sorry for what her father has done, but simply shares her grievance for the figurines broken.

Children feel alienated from their parents when they are continuously hurt and they try to step out if the parents who are supposed to, do not provide them with the security. Of all other family members Kambili is greatly affected by her father's extremism and she is unable to come out of the emotional trauma. She mentions that her brother, who has never disobeyed their father leaves the dining table before the prayer, she shivers and develops cough and headache envisaging the punishment, when Jaja moves up even after hearing his father's calling. "I reached for my glass and stared at the juice, watery yellow, ... I poured all of it down my throat, in one gulp. I didn't know what else to do. This had never happened before in my entire life, never" (14).

Eugene reiterates punishing his wife and children at several occasions as he reckons their actions to be immoral. His devotion to Western religion and ideas leads him to abuse his family. He constrains his family to fast on every Sundays until they return home from church. Unfortunately Kambili has menstrual pains before going to Mass and on the insistence of her mother she eats some corn flakes to avoid taking the panadol tablets in an empty stomach. But undesirably Eugene reaches before Kambili has eaten. He is enraged for breaking the Eucharistic fast and he flogs all the three with his belt. Jaja is beaten for preparing the food, Beatrice for watching over and Kambili for perpetrating the evil act. "He unbuckled his belt slowly. ... It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm, which was covered by the puffy sequined sleeve of her church blouse. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back" (102). Kambili remembers the Fulani nomads who herd their cows across the roads by

flapping it, when the belt lands on her mother, Jaja and herself. Earlier when Jaja is ten years old Eugene punished him for not receiving the name of best boy in his First Holy Communion class by locking up the door in which his little left finger is cut-off.

Eugene makes up his mind to punish Kambili and Jaja to correct them as they stray from his principles and faith. Kambili is surprised and she climbs up the stairs when her father calls her from the bathroom. She remembers her days when she attended her elementary schooling, because her father has asked Jaja and her to climb into the bath tub to punish with the stick. How cruel should Papa be in punishing the small children so that Kambili is able to bear in mind the rude punishments of her father? When Kambili is confused why his father has asked her to do so, he lays blame on her for not notifying that their grandfather is brought to Nsukka. Eugene lowers the kettle that contains hot water and slowly pours it on Kambili's feet. His act is as if he is to conduct an experiment. When Kambili screams out of pain, her father warns her that she burns her feet if she walks into sin. Jaja also endures with the pain of same punishment. Eugene has done an inhumane act which a father dares not to do for his own children.

The pain that Kambili tolerates due to her father's punishments becomes worse. Kambili is scared that her father might find out the painting of Papa-Nnukwu which she had with her: "I was familiar with, fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours" (196). When Eugene discovers the treasured picture of Papa-Nnukwu, he tears the painting and Kambili in an attempt to protect the picture sinks to the floor, on the torn pieces she lies down. In memory of her deceased, estranged grandfather Kambili could only have his image but that too is destroyed because of her father's resentment. She visualizes Papa-Nnuwu's body being cut into pieces, Kambili is not allowed to rejoice in the shadow of his love when he was alive, after his death too she could not have

something in reminiscence of him. “The painting was gone. It already represented something lost, something I had never had, would never have” (210). Eugene urges Kambili to get away from the floor, the painting, but she moves not. He ferociously kicks her with the metal buckles on his slippers. He rebukes Kambili in English as well as in Igbo. He does not stop with kicking alone; he also lands the belt on her side, back and legs. Kambili groans in pain as she undergoes the sting of buckles like bites of mosquitoes, lying on the painting is so soft and feathery since the body alone realizes the pain while the mind delights in Papa-Nnukwu’s touch through the painting. She ends up in a critical condition in St. Agnes hospital. Even a light touch of her mother gives Kambili the pain of pricking needles and the fire burning all over her body. She avers to wake up as she experiences the pain of a hammer knocking at her head. Kambili who is scared of injections gets practiced to it after the incident.

Only few expressions such as ‘yes’ and ‘oh’ are exclaimed by Kambili, the words hesitate to fall out of her mouth. Her cousins are able to voice their opinions freely. Since she is perturbed by the severe punishments of her father, speaking has become a delicate chore. Eugene, the head of the household forces his family into a deep silence out of fear and veneration; he grasps away their voices and thus they are feeble. Whenever Amaka speaks Kambili looks at her excitedly so as to know how easy is it to open her mouth and speak. The words flow fluently without any stuttering. Amaka is so sharp in belittling Kambili, misunderstanding her coyness and apprehensiveness for superciliousness. Kambili is ashamed and wants to blend and disappear into the darkened walls of kerosene smoke to avoid the pricking words of Amaka. Formerly she wished that the whole compound should be swallowed by the ground, when she faced an embarrassing situation of her father talking to her classmate Chinwe at her school. As Kambili is restrained by her father mentally and physically she always retracts herself from facing up the predicament.

The sharing of views and joys of Amaka and her friends induce Kambili to long for it but she fears that she might stutter,

I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so – much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way did, but my lips held stubbornly together. I did not want to stutter, so I started to cough and then ran out and into the toilet. (141)

Despite Kambili's rehearsals she is not granted with a platform to speak out without stuttering or coughing. Though Kambili and her brother are accustomed to the aggravation at home they do not speak to anybody about ugly truth of their situation. She is comfortless and discomfited by seeking solace in revealing the fact. She worries not to explain her friends and cousin about the inability to socialize with them. Amaka criticizes her cousin's tranquility and her father's affluence, for her grudge in sharing the household chores. Even the atmosphere and people in Nsukka could not avert Kambili from retreating into silence. Amaka, by observing them in her own house doubts why her cousins behave funny. "Something is not right with them" (142).

Kambili is astonished to see Jaja speak freely without any blocks in his throat. He is unlike Kambili who stutters for all the replies. He blossoms by befriending with his cousins and assisting in ménage works. He observes his younger cousin, Obiora and helps his aunt in tending a garden and killing a chicken. He becomes more gregarious than his sister. Jaja washes the car of Aunty Ifeoma which looks so dusty, he involves in a work which he has never done at home. Jaja physically grows, "His shoulders seemed broader, and I wondered if it was possible for a teenager's shoulders to broader in a week" (154). He is able to involve himself along with Obiora and Aunty Ifeoma in watching TV and conversing, which Kambili could not. Kambili wonders at Jaja by his new spirit to question his cousin what 'okada' is. Questioning is an unusual act which they are not practiced to. The braveness and courage of

Obiora is special for Kambili while she could not be like him, “He was a bold, male version of what I could never have been at fourteen, what I still was not” (138).

Life in Nsukka earns Kambili a new experience where laughter is casual and no reason is needed, strong and weak arguments fell off as they raise, morning and night prayers accompanied by Igbo songs, food with little meat shared by everyone and the household works done in turns. She observes a different version of family life and faith. Kambili and Jaja who are overthrown only by adversity at home are exposed to new thoughts after coming to Nsukka. Auntie Ifeoma encourages Kambili to speak up for herself, while Father Amadi incites her to speak up and speak her mind. Kambili is satisfied with the company of Father Amadi as if she is at home. He urges to ask questions like Amaka and to develop the art of questioning. At first Kambili smiles, later laughs. She is not confident that the sound is of her laughter, she doubts if it is the recorded one of some others played back. Kambili smiles, runs and laughs being with Amadi. She is eager to go to the stadium or anywhere with him. Kambili feels something light in her heart. Kambili and Jaja come of their age only after arriving at Nsukka. They realize that they can see the world around in a different perspective rather than what they have perceived so far. Kambili’s stay at Nsukka provides her fresh energy and when the school resumes she joins the girls to play volleyball, speaks to other girls and her behaviour stops the class mates from calling her ‘backyard snob’.

She wishes to leave with Father Amadi to Germany or with Auntie Ifeoma to America. She does not even want to come back again forever. The place does not matter for her but for the people whom she is mattered. So she wishes to leave Papa and move away with any of them. Father Amadi tells Kambili that Auntie Ifeoma wishes them to join a boarding school and he would speak to Father Benedict to convince her father. Going to a boarding school is the answer for Kambili’s question what they would do without the family of Auntie

Ifeoma “I think it is the best thing for you both now to go to school away from home” (279). After the death of her father, Kambili passionately dreams to see her father in her dream. Once Kambili did not feel free to talk about future, but now she tells her mother when Jaja is released they would go to Nsukka and then to America to visit Aunty Ifeoma.

In some occasions, one particular member of a family would be concerned about his self and violate the ethics of family. He lays his own ethics and does not bother much about the deceit of conduct and action committed. Those violations at small level might result in great adversarial acts at later. It is the environment of home that shapes the character of its members and every evil thought and deed of the aged would reflect in the upcoming generation. At times when vengeance overwhelms it motivates war and loss will be the only remnant at the end. Egotism filled thoughts intruded in the originality of others and dragged them towards their notion. Personal, cultural, social and political confrontation results in ramshackle life. Endeavour for emancipation from one’s own home is a pitiable plight that exists among mankind and need to be shed off by believing in egalitarianism.

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