Escapism and the Feminist Agenda in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus

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INTRODUCTION

Although the feminist trajectory in modern African literature became more robust among writers and critics from the 1980s, the phenomenon has been fraught with an ironic sense of essentialism which further deepens male-chauvinism or patriarchy. Firstly, scholars in the field seem to have resolved erroneously that earlier male writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembane Ousmane, Cyprian Ekwensi and so on were fierce anti-feminists who perpetrated a phallocentric discourse in Africa and should not be trusted with defence of women. Secondly, most other scholars smugly from this idea, therefore announce the rise of a crop of female writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chimanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Ata as feminist disciples, exhibiting differing degrees of intensity in their agitations to mercifully rescue the female gender from suppression. Both arguments are to say the least, two side sides of the same counterfeit coin; a negation of the intellectual interrogation of the social construction of gender as well as the promotion of the biological dichotomy between both sexes in literature.

To begin with in modern literary theory, the author whose creative endeavour forms the subject of debate by critics has been declared dead. The import of Roland Barthe’s manifesto statement for postmodernist thought in this direction is first and foremost to confer on the critic the duty of teasing out meaning in whatever perspective from a work of art. With the relativisation of values and opinions, the post modern society believes that one opinion is as good as another. Long established traditions and ideologies have been successfully challenged and even replaced by newer ones. Texts that were once interpreted as conservative could be re-interpreted in radical perspectives. Infact, Chinua Achebe, the
“whipping boy” of virtually all African feminist critics is said to have depicted in his novel, Things Fall Apart the worst form anti-feminism with his penchant for romanticizing male domination, women beating, polygamy and the confinement of female characters to domestic roles. The likes of Ogunyemi [60-67], Ezeigbo [53-71], and Umanukwe [339-345], have variously argued that Achebe’s first novel thoroughly undermined the active role of the women in the Igbo traditional society, all because he seeks to be faithful to his craft of realism. Yet it is also possible to present an argument to the contrary. The following passage in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart might appear to demonstrate male-heroism but it is in fact a negation of it:

Okwonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper and so did his little children. Perhaps down in his heart, Okonkwo is not a cruel man. But the who of his life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness (p.9).

The passage as written by Achebe is itself self-explanatory. The author gives a psychoanalytical explanation as to why Okonkwo has to appear so harsh to his wife and children. There can be no more subtle and damaging interrogation of the idea of male domination than this depiction of fear and cowardice. However, Ogwude’s radical analysis of the stubbornness and quest for freedom exhibited by Okonkwo’s third wife, Ekwefi, gives an even direct exposition of Achebe’s pro-feminist disposition. Ekwefi chooses whom to marry between Anene and Okonkwo, she is appreciated by her husband inspite of her not having a male child for him; she stands up to her husband in moments of his domestic anger and she challenges Chielo, the priestess, whom she courageously follows to he shrine while the brave Okonkwo cows in fear of metaphysical repercussions. (120)

Secondly, the philosophy of feminism is ab initio given a wrong premise as the exclusive right of female writers and critics. Elaine Showalter first thought of a woman as a writer and critic, creating a specifically female tradition in which female writers and critics were better placed to read and theorize their own world. Hence, according to her:

The woman (becomes) the producer of textual meaning, with the history of genres and structures of literatures by women. It subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of female language; the trajectory of the individual or the collective literary career, literary history and course studies of particular writers and works (128)

And more recently Sophia Ogwude stresses the same essentialist segregationist agenda in her introduction to a published collection of essays depicting the female image in African literature. She says:

In the enterprise of woman as reader of a creative work, a woman addresses two major issues. First, she must interrogate the authenticity of the female portraiture being in a better position to relate and understand a woman as a seat of (female) consciousness herself. Next, it behooves her to articulate the possible effects of all such misrepresentations encourage and even enjoin women to ultimately continue to behave in such ways as to maintain the status quo. (2).

Whether by mistake or by design, it would appear male scholars have been consistently debarred from entering into feminist literary arena. Only female scholars seem to dominate the field of feminist criticism or at least male critics who are willing to concede to women as he
more qualified group to comment on feminine matters. Members of this latter group are always invariably blackmailed to follow a well-beaten track of accepting just any new female writer as a fighter of feminist cause and male writers as supporting the status quo. SuleEgya [Ogwude; 211] observes that both the older and younger female writers in Nigeria have abandoned the portrayal or the rural woman in fiction and picked on the educated woman to depict her as more, more radical and assertive. Similarly, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu [71] in their definitive text on the 21st century Nigerian literature also unwittingly concede to the argument that newer female writers have tended to be more feminist than their predecessors.

However, feminism, like Marxism and post-colonialism are theories that study the sociological or political motivations of works of arts. While Marxism uses class relations as an instrument of analysis, feminism engages in the analysis of gender and post-colonialism, engages racial concerns. All these three are united at the level of ideology where society legitimises or justifies certain unfair social and economic arrangements that are seen to be acceptable to both the oppressor and the oppressed. In the case of gender relationship in almost all societies of the world and for a long time since creation, the female gender has been subjected to oppression and suppression in a manner that even the victims have been blinded by the ideology to think it is reasonable or natural to have them in such a situation. These justifications are implicit in all beliefs of society, be they religious, cultural, economic, historical and even legal practices. The critics have a duty to examine. These ideologies and expose their contradictions. To dismantle this would not only require the agitation of the victims, but also the understanding of the oppressor. It is in this regard that Ruthven advises critics against an essentialists approach to the struggle which he describes also as self-indicting.

(So) to hear a woman say that a true understanding of feminist criticism calls for an inwardness beyond the reach of any man sounds like a regression to the bad old days when women had intuitions and men had to make do with brains (8).

Thirdly, most humanist feminist critics are of the opinion that Western civilization is a sine qua non for feminism, and as such every other form of female agitation in traditional African society is described by their lesser varieties of feminism like “womanism”, “stiwanism”, “motherism” and the likes. The implication here is that earlier novels by female writers like Nwapa, Emecheata, Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow and RebekaNjau who depict characters that were not educated enough to wage a war against male domination are considered a diluted form of feminism. This impression is however challenged effectively by Ogwude in an essay she writes to analyse the female warrior characters in the novels of Sol Plaajee, FathyGhanem, TayebSalih and Nuredeen Farrah, all set in the early history of modern African literature. The idea of portraying contemporary female writers like Sefi Atta, ChimamandaAdichie, and Adimora-Ezeigbo as more potent feminists is therefore suspect. This paper examines the portrayals of female characters in ChimamandaAdichie’s Purple Hibiscus, a novel written in the 21st century by one of Africa’s younger novelists with the view to interrogating this wrongly held notion that educational enlightenment logically gives rise to a higher degree of feminism among women. As we shall prove, Adichie’s characters are rather escapist or at best complacent when it comes to interrogating the phallocentric establishment in the African society.
ADICHE’S ESCAPISM

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary definition of escapism is the idea of “engaging in an activity or a form of entertainment to help you avoid or forget unpleasant or boring things of life” for a while. To Chimamanda Adichie, the experience of patriarchy is bad enough; but it is more traumatic when viewed from the innocent lens of her heroin, Kimbili, an adolescent girl being physically abused by a supposedly religious father. Adichie creates other female characters in the novel who meet daunting challenges of patriarchy, but have not risen up to the standard expected of them as educated ladies in the society.

The novel opens with a scene on a palm sunday. Jaja, the teenage brother of Kimbili, rebels against their father, Eugene Achike’s strict order to attend communion service. Eugene’s kind of Christianity dominated by all male officials is symbolic of a phallocentric instrument in the hands of the so-called western educated elite. While the young Jaja challenges Eugene’s high-handedness, the female folks in the Achike household remain stoically complacent. Eugene is scandalized because Jaja has no justifiable reason not to participate in the communion on such a holy day. His angrily flings his missal at his son which misses the target and hits the bookshelves, breaking his wife’s cherished ceramic figurines. While the younger girl’s response to Jaja’s rebellion was to gaze at Jaja so much that “my shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth”, the older lady merely “stared at the figurines pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with his bare hands (7). The reaction of these two ladies over this dastardly incident of child abuse and excessive male-domination is that of complacency as both seem quite unprepared to face the consequences of challenging patriarchy. Both of them choose to escape into sanctimonious servitude in the presence of the head of the family.

Socially and politically, Adichie builds up Eugene as an epitome of influence in the novel, but neither his wife nor his children are depicted as part of this success. He is an entrepreneur and a well known personality in Enugu who owns many factories and a publishing house that publishes the politically sensitive The Standard newspaper. His high profile image in the church and in public affairs naturally creates the need for him to be philanthropic. He is quite generous in his parish and equally donates to his children’s school. His newspaper is critical of the corruption that characterizes the Nigerian government.

Back at home, Eugene’s figure continues to loom large. Kambili and her brother, Jaja, follow a regimented way of life specifying for them times to study, eat, pray, sleep and sit with their parents. This rigid life mapped for Kambili by her father makes her mute. Whenever she tries to speak, she stutters or coughs. She is a brilliant student and often takes first position in all examinations. Her classmates see her as a snob because she is under compulsion by his father not to socialise with his classmates but to leave the school immediately in a chauffeur-driven car. At home too, Kambili is brought up not knowing household chores and is regarded by her cousin Amaka, Aunty Ifeoma’s daughter as a snob.

A significant moment in the novel is the time Kambili and her brother spend at Nsukka, at the house of their father widowed sister, Aunty Ifeoma who lives with her three children. The atmosphere at Nsukka contrasts sharply with the suffocating and oppressive affluence of their Enugu Home. They had made life unbearable for them imposing his fanatical Christian beliefs and regimental way of life. Ifeoma on the other hand, practices a different kind of Christianity, tolerating
other people and mixing freely with people of other faiths. Eugene cannot tolerate his father, Papa Unuku, and what he describes as his “heathen” way of life, but Ifeoma accepts the old man. Ifeoma’s house is a place of freedom and laughter, a place where Kambili found love too with her encounter with the young Reverend Father Amadi. It was also at Ifeoma’s house that she had a long and satisfying encounter with her grandfather, Papa Unuku, whose picture painting she takes away to Enugu for keeps. While admiring the painting, unknown to her, Eugene appears and finds her guilty of hobnobbing with the painting of his “heather” father. She beats Kambili till she loses consciousness. Her description of the scene of brutality goes like this:

Get up! Papa said again. I did not move. He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes… The kicking increased in tempo… The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air. A low voice was saying, “pleasebiko, please”. More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet. (211)

We may admit that the fifteen year-old Kambili is too young to respond to her father’s acts of aggression. But what about her mother under whose nose Kambili is being battered this way? Beatrice merely begs in a low voice: “please, biko please.” Beatrice’s complacency is illustrative of a typical African housewife overwhelmed with the burden of male domination but are not willing to take a chance to risk their marriages. She laments that, “where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Tell me where I would go?... Do you know how many mothers push their daughters to him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnant them, even and not to bother paying a bride price? (250). Like in all victims of ideological warfare, Eugene’s wife comes out justifying why she needed to stay in this abusive marriage and to sustain its legitimacy. In fact she tells her sister-in-law point blank that “a husband crowns a man’s life” (75).

She also regularly takes her turn of battery from her abusive husband with stoic equanimity. She suffered two miscarriages as a result of these assaults. On a particular Sunday, Eugene becomes offended that Beatrice had not gone early enough to pay homage to the white Reverend Father Benedict after the mass. This became the cause for the beating she got from her husband which led to her miscarriage of an advanced pregnancy:

I was in my room after lunch…when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parent’s hand-cared bedroom door. I imagined the door had gotten stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true. I sat down, closed my eyes and started to count… I heard the door open. Papa’s gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual. “There’s blood on the floor”, Jaja said, “I’ll get the brush from the bathroom.”

We cleared up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of red watercolour all the way downstairs. (32-3).

Reduced to a wretch, a millionaire’s wife whose idle lifestyle is even denied the joy of two more childbirths, and being unable to stand up to Eugene, Beatrice seeks to escape into widowhood by poisoning and killing her husband. She succeeds and
could have been jailed, but her son pleads guilty on her behalf and her life is spared.

Aunty Ifeoma is perhaps the most enlightened female character described in Purple Hibiscus. She is the only sibling of Eugene who is hardworking, beautiful and intelligent. She is a widow and works as a university teacher at Nsukka. In all her appearances in the novel, she demonstrates capacity, determination and resourcefulness in every aspect of life. She brings up her three children to be God fearing and also be free thinkers. Although, she is very outspoken and assertive, she is unable to talk to his brother, Eugene to stop his battering of his wife and children. She merely blames Eugene in her discussion with his wife without putting in as much interest and emotions as she does in the strained relationship between Eugene and Papa Unuku.

She also encounters her fair share of financial challenges trying to raise up young children under the harsh economic conditions in Nigeria. But she always keeps her problems to herself and does not pester her millionaire brother with requests for favours. Her challenges in the university system become overwhelming and she arranges with a colleague based in the United States to secure a job there. Noticed for being agitative over the deteriorating leaning conditions in the university, some of her less endowed colleagues include her name on the list of disloyal lecturers sent to the government. So just before her letter of termination of her appointment is issued, she attends a US Visa interview and secures his Visa to leave the shores of Nigeria.

Aunty Ifeoma’s voice was many notches lower than usual. “They have given me notice of termination,” she said without even waiting for me to reply her. “How are3 you?” “For what they call illegal activity I have one month. I have applied for a visa at the American Embassy.” (261)

This notice of termination of appointment does not deter Aunty Ifeoma from her revolutionary utterances against sycophancy and the decay in the university system. However, she plans her escape from this system, inspite of the derision Nigerian exiles are held in the West. In her discussion with Obiora before her sack, she learnt that Nigerian exiles in the US were variously described as “second-class citizens”, “monkeys with ability to reason”, “washers of plates for Oyinbo” and “taxi-drivers” (p. 244). Yet Aunty Ifeoma known for her hatred for tyranny in Nigeria would rather embrace these identities than continue in what she regards as fruitless search of freedom from patriarchal and military hegemony.

In line with their stoic acceptance of patriarchy, Julie Mullaney [2010] observes correctly that Adichie’s female characters, particularly Kambili engage in laughter and song as an expression of social ease. Tension mounts on Eugene as soldiers arrest and torture and later murder his editor, Ade Coker. At home too, there is tension. Eugene is furious with Kambili and Jaja to keeping the picture of his “heathen” father and he descends on them heavily. She beats Kambili so severely that she is taken to hospital. After that she moves to Aunty Ifeoma’s place at Nsukka where she finds love in Father Amadi. It is in her relationship with Amadi that she finds solace in laughter and song, particularly the indigenous Igbo song. Mullaney describes the situation as thus:

Laughter is allied with the family’s joyous appreciation of Igbo song, a feature sheared with Father Amadi who develops a friendship with Kambili. Kambili’s learning to laugh is an index of her coming to self-possession and embodiment, a glimpse, however brief, of an alternative world to the one her father imagines of her. The seditious nature of this imagining is indicated by its association in dreams with a feeling
of possession by the laughter of others. (58)

Of course, the quickest escape routes out of emotional problems have been laughter and song which belie grave issues of the moment.

This is however, merely a pyrrhic victory. Laughter or song does not interrogate the male hegemony in Adichie’s society in any profound manner. It only serves to illustrate how Adichie’s female characters are vulnerable to the dictates of patriarchy, and their readiness to escape into their cocoons.

CONCLUSION

The premise of analysing a 21st century novel written by a female is to disabuse the notion held by critics recently that feminist agitations were increasing in Africa pari-passu with the increase in education and modernity.

Adiche’s novel is populated with women who are either educated or brought up under a western modernized society. These characters are depicted as coming face to face with the daily suppression of the female gender and are even outraged by the brutish high-handedness of phallocentric heroes like Eugene and Father Benedict. However, none of the female characters appear to have the courage to challenge the status quo even as they stoically accept their positions as victims of patriarchy.

Kambili, the heroin of the novel is merely a chronicler of events who expresses surprise at the frontal manner his brother, Jaja takes on their brutish father and also undermines the mindlessly oppressive religious order Father Benedict represents. Eugene’s wife poison’s her husband in a cowardly manner to enable her escape into widowhood from the institution of marriage, but again it takes the courage of Jaja to own up to the challenge. He bravely accepts the charge of manslaughter to save his timid mother from receiving capital punishment. Aunty Ifeoma who first strikes us as a radical university teacher, however takes in silently her brother, Eugene’s excesses against his family and is unable to challenge him as she does in Eugene’s ostracization of their father, Papa Unuku. She also cannot stand the heat of government persecution on campus at Nsukka and she hurriedly gets a visa to escape to the United States of America.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Adichie’s female characters were not forthright in executing the feminist agenda she may have thought of. Does it then mean Purple Hibiscus is bereft of feminism?

Perhaps her depiction of Eugene as an object of hate, irrationality, emotion and spirituality should undermine the superior position of the male folk over the female folk in their binary structure of the new order of things. Eugene is portrayed as emotionally unstable, and perhaps swapping traditional roles with his sister, Ifeoma, who in phallocentric philosophy, appears uncharacteristically masculine. Eugene is extremely intolerant of other people’s opinion except that of his white Reverend Father. He is so emotional about his religion that he on a number of occasions almost killed his children in physical torture all in a bid to instil christian discipline in them.

Jaja, a male, rebels against his high-handedness and his rebellion is described in a manner that parodies Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart in the very first sentence of the novel. It is significant that Achebe’s novel which is greatly maligned by critics for its depiction of male chauvinism is evoked here. However, it is also symbolic that it has taken a male character, Jaja, to challenge patriarchy in the scene and caused things to fall apart.
Works Cited


