*Purple Hibiscus* Level: Bachelor of Arts

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Objective: The course aims at interrogating a twenty-first century narrative so as to acquaint students with new novels coming out of Africa. In this case, light will be cast on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* by leaning on postcolonial theory as the reading gaze. In other words, the lecture will assert the voice of the Periphery vis-a-vis the all powerfulness of the Center.

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**Preliminary Remarks**

*Purple Hibiscus* is a novel published in 2003 by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the Nigerian-born female writer. Adichie ranks among what could be termed the new writers if reference is made to the last century during which such well-known names as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the likes were dominating the literary field.

Nowadays Adichie is a literary figure who cannot go unnoticed. Her publications, among others are, *Americanah* (2013), *The Thing Around Your Neck* ( 2010), *Half of a* *Yellow Sun ,* (2007).

In her 2003 narrative, at the literal level, the novel sheds light on the trials of the young lady Kambili and that of her family. One is informed of a family where the authority of the father is much more pronounced as he oppresses mother, son and daughter indiscriminately. Yet the reader discovers that such an autocratic figure also deplores the oppression of the repressive regime he so vehemently castigates. In other words, the champion of democracy nationwide is nothing but the gravedigger of freedom at home.

At a figurative level, the novel deals with the necessity to fight for freedom, be it at a personal level or at a collective one. In other words, rebellion is sometimes the answer provided the cause is right.

**Adichie and the English Language**

In Adichie’s text the reader is caught by the specificity of the English language. The point is her use of English as a language is far from what could be termed the western English. This is seen through the display of pidgin-English as well as the transliteration of Igbo into English and the implementation of the hybridized English.

Pidgin-English

This linguistic medium is not but the conjunction of English words with some references reminiscent of the local parlance. The following reference is quite appropriate here:

Great Lions and Lionesses! We wan people who dey wear clean underwear, no be so? Abi the Head of State dey wear clean underwear, sef, talkless of clean one? No! 229

What is being said in the case of pidgin-English is the loud rejection of the language of the West as far as the notion of orthodoxy is concerned. With this linguistic medium it is too clear that Adichie is ready to share in the features of this language to the rest of the word. The point is she writes in English to show English people she is no English.

Transliteration

In Adichie’s text, the reader discovers that characters draw from their native Igbo to express themselves. One good example is the following statement:

Mba, there are no words in my mouth 12

The above statement is meant to suggest that the character was simply speechless. Indeed this peculiar rendition is consequent upon the translation of Igbo language into English. Tough the words are written in the English language it must be asserted that the thinking is in Igbo tongue.

Hybridized English

Another reference to insist on the specificity of the English language being used in Adichies’ text is to be found in the hybridized English in her text. The following example is quite relevant here:

“Ke Kwanu,”? I asked, although I did not need to ask how he was doing 11

The reader is simply ill-at-ease as there is no translation for the Igbo words being used in the sentence. Though the bulk of the novel is written in English, one must hasten to assert that the English used is a distinct one, dissimilar to the canonical English. Here it is what Djiman Kasimi terms “Afro-Euro English”, meaning a language claiming a dual debt to Africa and Europe through its linguistic references.

The text therefore refuses to observe the all-powerfulness of the English language. The writer rejects the so-called superiority of English as the prescribed language. This is a way to break away from Europe’s universalist agenda.

This is a good case of what Bhabha terms’ liminal’ or in the words of Said a ‘partnership’

**In Praise of African Culture**

Adichie’s text sets out to extol African Culture. In the narrative, the writer rejects the view according to which her continent is culture-free.

This can be examined by paying attention to the presence of proverbs, onomastic reading, and storytelling.

Proverbs

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the reader can witness the presence of many proverbs. This must be made clear from the start. I am not saying that proverbs are specific to African culture. Here, the proverbs used are simply reminiscent of African culture, precisely Igbo culture. As an example I can quote the following one:

When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head 213

The point being addressed here is that caution is necessary in time of trouble. The reader has to understand that Adichie writes her narrative by drawing on African oral narrative and its wisdom.

Onomastic reading

Another aspect contributing to the promotion of African culture is that of the meaning of names. In the text, a good example is to be found on page 272:

‘Chiamaka,’ says God is beautiful

‘Chima’ says God knows best

‘Chiebuka’ says God is the greatest

Names are not given at random as they are means whereby Igbo, African culture is being promoted. The aim of the writer is to lay the stress on the validity of their cultural references so as to deny the European, imperialist claims.

Storytelling

Stories are drawn from African oral traditions. One can quote the following one in keeping with the tortoise on page 157:

Long ago, when animals talked and lizards were few, ……….

Stories are African modes of knowledge taken from oral traditions. The point is to insist on the need of cultural decolonization being promoted through this way of writing.

In postcolonial terms, this novel is keen on bringing into the open the voice of the periphery.

**Adichie and the Colonial Discourse**

The reader can argue that the colonial discourse comes readily under attack in *Purple Hibiscus*. In her narrative, it is all too clear that Adichie goes against the negative images being associated with Africa as embodied in the phrase “colonial discourse.” According to E. Said the colonial discourse is “ a lens through which the West sees the rest of the world and that lens distorts reality in various ways.” In other words, European mode of representation is far from being the truth as it seems to undermine non –Europeans.

This will be examined by looking into the following aspects:

The narrative level

At the narrative level, I can consider the spatial shift. Europe is no longer the Center of everything as another locus is also considered. In this case, Africa also comes in. A good example can be found with reference to the appearance of The Blessed Virgin in Aokpe, a village in Nigerian (99).

Likewise, priests are now going from Africa to Europe so as to convert souls to Christianity. In the narrative, the case of Father Amadi is illustrative of this. (279)

From the above, it is clear that Africa is no longer seen as the dark continent if reference is made to the colonial discourse. This is a good case of what Gayatri Spivak terms through her phrase ’the marginal can speak’ or the ‘proleptic stand’ of postcolonial theory.

The Intercultural

Adichies criticizes the colonial discourse as she goes for interculurality in the form of cultural mingling. This is a recurrent feature the novel seems to impart.

Priest Benedict not only has his sermon in English but Igbo also comes into play.

“And halfway through his sermon, he broke into an Igbo song……..(28)

In the same perspective, Kambili is readily impressed by the fact that a young Reverend Sister is expressing herself in Igbo. As she said: “I had never heard a white person speak Igbo, and so well” (215). That a white lady is expressing herself in Igbo is quite illustrative of this give and take approach pervasive in the text. No wonder that Brenda Cooper argues that “the novel’s goal … is to infuse Igbo customs into Catholic spirituality.”

The mere reconciliation of two cultures comes as a loud rejection of the claim that non-Westerners lack civilization. In that sense, one can argue that Adichie writes back to the Center.

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**Passages**

1.(13-14) “Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja………..*O zugo*, stop coughing”

2.(85-87) “Look at this”………………………”No, I didn’t”, Jaja mumbled

3.(214-216) “My PRIVATE TUTOR………..”for my recuperation”

4. (272-273) “ When the missionaries…….” was Christ’s bride”