

# Interface of the Environment and Characters in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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## Abstract

The focus of this paper exposed the engagement of the literary persons in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and its environment. How the characters interfaced with their environment to develop the plot is examined. The environment refers to the natural world as a whole or a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity. It can also refer to all circumstances, people, events, living or non-living things, physical or chemical processes, and natural forces. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the environment operationally refers to the cities and villages, flower gardens and insects, football field, the church, cultural and religious practices, the characters that people (inhabit) the setting of the novel. All these form the setting and influence the actions and behaviour of the characters. Eco-criticism as a literary theory best explains the relationship between literature and the environment. It interpretes the actions of the characters based on their surroundings. This literary exercise used a branch of eco-criticism that studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment to analyze Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

**Keywords:** characters, environment, interface

## 1. Introduction

Characters refer to the people that inhabit a literary work. Depending on the author's point of view, animals could be used symbolically to represent characters. Setting refers to the contrived world which the characters live in, interacting with one another in a literary text. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the characters are affected by the plants and seasons. This engagement of the environment and characters in the plot of this novel attracts eco-criticism to its analysis.

Cheryll Glotfelty is the father of eco-criticism in the United States of America while Jonathan Bate is considered the founder in England. Eco-criticism emerged in the 1980s because of environmental degradation. However, environmental movement began in the 1960s with the publication of Rachael Carson's work entitled *Silent Spring*. Eco-criticism also deals with reality itself and how human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and is affected by it (OWL.purdue2018). In the United Kingdom eco-criticism is referred to as Green Studies and its emphasis is on violence in the environment, especially how urbanization causes pollution and poverty. In the United States of America it is called eco-criticism and the emphasis is to celebrate nature (OWL.purdue2018) and it shows how useful it is writing about nature. The definition by Bertens (2008) states that: "eco-criticism examines representations of nature in literary texts, films, televisions, etc (p.200)".

There other terms identified with eco-criticism: **pastoral** deals with the difference between urban and rural life; **wilderness** discusses the engagement of wilderness in literature. Mention must be made of **eco-feminism** which is a branch of this theory that looks at nature, women, other oppressed groups, races and their interaction with dominant power. There is also eco-grief that looks at environmental toxins that cause cancer and other diseases in the human body.

There are three main settings in *Purple Hibiscus*: Enugu, Abba and Nsukka all in present day Enugu State of Nigeria. To the character of Eugene Achike, Enugu and Abba are very important. Nevertheless, Nsukka counterpoises Enugu and Abba to enable the story teller compare the two families prominent in the novel. The narrator's family operates between Enugu and Abba ostensibly determined and conditioned by the harmattan and Christmas season. The head of this family is called Eugene Achike whose religious piety dehumanizes members of

his nuclear and extended families. Eugene's religious piety is contrasted with that of his younger sister Aunty Ifeoma, married also into a Catholic family resident at Nsukka. Aunty Ifeoma practises her religion with human freedom, joy and laughter. These two family heads are polarized on religious observances, underpinning the difference between a female headed-household and the normal or male-headed household. Mention must be made that Aunty Ifeoma is a widow saddled with the upbringing of three children with a meagre wage as a lecturer in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

## 2. Enugu Garden and Intimate Violence

The reader perceives the engagement of the environment in the actions of the characters. For example, when the plot of *Purple Hibiscus* is "sutured" it will be observed that the conflict began after the brief holiday in Aunty Ifeoma's house at Nsukka with the following engagement of nature in the plot. Disharmony in the family is configured thus:

Everything came tumbling down after Palm Sunday. Howling winds came with an angry rain, uprooting frangipani trees in the front yard. They lay on the lawn, their pink and white flowers grazing the grass, their roots waving lumpy soil in the air. The satellite dish on top of the garage came crashing down, lounged on driveway like a visiting alien spaceship. The door of my wardrobe dislodged completely. Sisi broke a full set of Mama's china (p. 261).

This introduces the vehemence with which Jaja rejects Holy Communion on Palm Sunday. He acts on hurts and wounds precipitated by his father's religious practices, a rejection of what Eugene Achike stands for, his uncompromising principles and his conviction to go to heaven after death. When compared with Aunty Ifeoma and Fr Amadi, Eugene and Fr Benedict, Jaja finds deception in what his father and Fr Benedict practice. Rejecting Holy Communion is a negation of his father's religious stance, an interrogation of every decision and action of Eugene Achike especially his repudiation of Papa Nnukwu, his refusal to assist Aunty Ifeoma financially. The schedule that regiments family life, incessant battering of his wife even during pregnancy emotionally deplete his children.

Eugene's style of parenting deserves attention here. A parent promotes emotional, physical, intellectual, and social development of his children. Eugene is lacking in providing emotional support for his children. His wife is forced into passivity being punished the same way her children are punished. When Kambili eats cornflakes to aid medication for menstrual cramp ten minutes before Holy Mass, the punishment is for everyone. The narrator states: "[Eugene] unbuckled his belt slowly . . . It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm. I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back" (p.110). This qualifies as intimate violence when family relationship is riddled with "pronounced tension, driving people to despair or filling them with a deep sense of anxiety or guilt" (Giddens 2008 p.219). He practices authoritarian parenting.

Eugene falls into the refuge of religious fanaticism by wholly identifying with Fr Benedict who does not find merit in the culture of his parishioners. Having been formed by Catholic piety and Fr Benedict's austere Christianity, everything Eugene does is marked by extremism. Nevertheless this finds expression in the environment within his Enugu residence where the hibiscus plant in his garden is scarlet. The buzzing bees attracted to the yellow cashew fruits reflect how busy and regimented his life is. The bees are busy creatures symbolizing his success in business with factories that manufacture fruit juice, wafer and biscuits. His success in business does not ensure a happy family. The scarlet hibiscus flowers denote emotional strain and overwhelming trauma on his family. But the buzzing bees at Nsukka garden lull Kambili to sleep. He is also a media owner of *The Standard Newspaper* with a retinue of domestic servants and factory staff. His family life is regimented around culinary timetable, children's academic life, family time during which newspaper commentary is discussed. His children are Jaja and Kambili. Their activities are defined by studying, washing their school uniforms or playing chess indoors. They are not seen playing outdoors. They speak in whispers bereft of humour, laughter or songs (*Purple Hibiscus* pp.132&176). In an earlier work, Dick (2009), blames this restricted type of life on "religious fanaticism overtly succored by the unrestrained praises by the British Father Benedict" (p.100).

Their life is structured on schedule placed on the wall above their beds in their respective rooms. The schedule or timetable sets him as strict and authoritarian. This schedule was taken to Nsukka when they went on Christmas holidays at Aunty Ifeoma's house. However, Aunty Ifeoma overrules the use of that schedule in her own house (*Purple Hibiscus* p.132). Enugu garden stands out as chaotic like trauma that never heals. This is echoed by Jaja when he states that the shock felt by Ade Coker's daughter after the bomb blast that rips Ade Coker open will never heal: "She will never heal, Jaja said. She may have started talking now, but she will never heal" (p.263). For Jaja, his mother has endured enough pain, seeing her go with the police is unbearable, so he pleads guilty, swapping prison terms with his mother (p.295).

There is a catalogue of human suffering. Jaja's finger is charred, he batters his wife resulting to numerous miscarriages, Kambili is hospitalized after a brutal beating for preserving the painting of Papa Nnukwu. "Still air, slowly rousing itself after the rain, clouds like cotton wool tufts announced the arrival of Mama after Eugene broke a small prayer table on her stomach causing another miscarriage (p. 252)". Ade Coker is murdered in the middle of parched harmattan, on a day it rained heavily (p.212).

### 3. Nsukka Garden and Family Life

Aunty Ifeoma is portrayed as an exuberant, hilarious woman with loud laughter that echoes for a while (p.100). The purple hibiscus flower adds grace and candour to her poor residence. Her garden at University of Nigeria Nsukka is a circular burst of bright colours, budding hybrid hibiscus plant that blossoms purple flowers. Other plants include ixora, roses, lilies, croton growing side by side like a painted wreath (p.120) replicated in her affectionate reception of Jaja and Kambili. The narrator states: "She barely waited for us to climb out of the car before hugging us, squeezing us close together so we both fit in the stretch of her arms (p.121)." The flowers in her garden show her as more ecumenical and accommodating than her brother Eugene Achike. Eugene's flowers are plucked to decorate the altar in St Agnes's Catholic Church Enugu only, while the flowers in Aunty Ifeoma's house are plucked by women from both Catholic and Anglican communion to decorate their church alters. Life in Aunty Ifeoma's house is not regimented. Morning and night prayers are interspersed with native Christian songs and ended with prayer to find laughter in their daily interactions.

Moreover, the spirit of African community life finds expression here making generation gap as elastic as possible. Their grandfather, Papa Nnukwu, is accommodated in Ifeoma's family, celebrated and desired. He tells them folktales, they cook native delicacy (*ofe nsala*) and take turns to watch him when he sits in the verandah (p.173). Adichie casts Nsukka garden as a landscape of moral harmonious order that houses Aunty and her children contrasting it with the chaotic garden at Enugu. This section will be concluded by stating that Aunty Ifeoma is a humanizing presence.

### 4. Kambili Speaks Again

The process of emotional, physical and spiritual healing of Kambili begins in Nsukka the day she "watched a wilted African lily fall from its stalk in the garden. The crotons rustled in the late morning breeze" (p.177). Her interaction with Aunty Ifeoma's children, other boys in the stadium coordinated through Fr Amadi's pastoral functions gives voice to a speechless Kambili. She concludes that she is no longer confined or in captivity. Now imbued with a new personality she states; "I had smiled, run, laughed. My chest was filled with something like bath foam. Light. The lightness was so sweet I tasted it on my tongue, the sweetness of an overripe bright yellow cashew fruit (p.187)". Also, Jaja becomes a new personality by working with Obiora on the garden, fetching water, washing Aunty Ifeoma's car and other chores. Obiora is protective of his mum and Jaja likes it. This prompts him to appropriate his mother's crime swapping detention in prison.

Jaja and Kambili's actions have been couched in whispers, and silence for fear of Eugene and hell fire. They were regulated by religious piety of Fr Benedict. But the pastoral activities of Fr Amadi negated the pastoral piety of Fr Benedict resulting in courage, self confidence and new individuality. As Fr Amadi announces his posting to Germany, Amaka tells him:

The white missionaries brought us their god. . . .Which was the same colour as them, worshipped in their language and packaged in the boxes they made. Now that we take their god back to them, shouldn't we at least repack it (p.271)?

It is cheering to see a new woman making up though unsuccessfully in shorts dashing out to stadium for sports.

### 5. The Elements and Eugene's Philanthropy

The elements refer to strong winds, heavy rain or other conditions of bad weather. It seems that the elements underpin Eugene's philanthropic stance as the following excerpts highlight:

Dust-laden winds of the harmattan came with December. They brought the scent of the Sahara and Christmas, yanked the slender, ovate leaves down from the frangipani and the needle-like leaves from the whistling pines, covering everything in a film of brown . . . .

The morning winds were swift on the day we left, pushing the whistling pine trees so that they are bent and twisted, as if bowing to a dusty god . . . (p. 61).

Harmattan launches the Christmas season in Igboland of Nigeria. December and Christmas mark the exodus of Igbo in diaspora/cities to the villages for re-union, community life, and kinship socialization. Therefore the setting shifts

to Abba. At Ninth Mile, Eugene buys okpa, distributes money to the women from whom he does not buy (p.61). Moreover, the half naked boys acclaim his traditional title Omelora, One Who Does for the Community. He gives them money instructing them to show the money to their parents (p.63) thus portraying his strictness. Because of the season, the characters become more human, the plot acquires greater verisimilitude. His compound at Abba is outsized. The reader beholds the wealth of Eugene Achike: four storey building, food, drinks for hosting church council meeting, town council meeting and to lodge numerous visitors, friends and relatives. Pots big enough to contain whole goats accentuate Eugene's title. The presence of the wives of the umunna cooking, eating, drinking and visits of villagers, fellow feelings show kinship socialization. Beatrice/Mama and her children become affable and relaxed unlike the regimented life at Enugu. However, he ostracizes his father and other traditionalist, excluding them from his charity. Waste is also depicted because nobody inhabits this mansion throughout the year except at Christmas period (p.66).

Abba makes the characters more human as the action of characters is prodded by their environment. The rustling of coconut fronds, bleating goats, crowing cocks signal daybreak. People yell greetings to one another across mud compound walls to depict community life and attendant joy of Christmas period (p.66). Usually harvest is over and people are at home in preparation for next planting season. The religious barrier between Eugene and his father, Papa Nnukwu is reviewed through flashback. The role of the male elders in conflict resolution becomes evident; Papa Nnukwu is portrayed as a strongman with incredible faith in his traditional religion, which cannot be shaken by Eugene's wealth. The religious barrier is couched in irony of quality of residence:

Eugene lives in an imposing four storey building, with glaring white walls, silver coloured water fountain while Papa Nnukwu's house has small unpainted cement blocks compact like dice, with creaking wooden gate and a veranda bounded by rusty metal bars. His food placed on a raffia mat as he sat on a low stool a white . . . his singlet browned by age and yellow at the armpit, walking stick fashioned from a crooked tree branch (pp. 70-75).

## 6. Traditional Religion and the Tragedy of Eugene

The prominence an event gains during narration is projected by the action of the environment, invading the setting with what science and technology calls superstition. Papa Nnukwu's *chi* pervades the world view of the setting and is in constant interaction with the characters. One of the tenets of African Traditional Religion is reincarnation which is the belief in the cyclic nature of life. Cayce refers to it as "the continuity life" (edgarcayce.org). Through Papa Nnukwu, it is revealed that Jaja is Ogbuefi Olioke come back. Ogbuefi Olioke is Papa Nnukwu's father. He prays to his *chi* for great prospects for his children and grand children and died smiling to his *chi*. Eugene prays for the conversion of his father without adequate welfare. Ironically he dies from poison prepared by his wife and his housemaid.

The premonition of his death is taken over by the elements:

Outside, the rain came down in slants, hitting the closed window with a furious rhythm. It would hurl down cashews and mangoes from the trees they would start to rot in the humid earth, giving out the sweet-and-sour scent (*Purple Hibiscus* p. 292).

His condition is as tragic as Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* whose commitment to his culture leads him to commit murder and ultimately suicide. An alien government more powerful and brutal overwhelms Umuofia. Fr Benedicts wields an overwhelming power over Eugene. Eugene's commitment to his faith and Fr Benedict alienates him from his wife, children, sister, father and other kins. He fails to navigate between family relationships and the fear of hell just like Okonkwo is afraid of being thought weak. He is killed by the herbs prepared by his housemaid's uncle. His death signals a new social ascendancy for his family who plan to travel to the United States of America to re-unite with Aunty Ifeoma and her children. His funeral obsequies do not complement his opulence in life. Papa Nnukwu fares better in this. Papa Nnukwu's funeral is celebrated with seven cows amidst traditional rites. He is buried as he professed. Eugene dies, his family survives him, happy and harmonious but without funeral rites.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the interaction of the characters and the environment in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The environment refers to the surroundings of living organisms. It includes human beings, animals, plants, insects, the seasons, etc. Eco-criticism is a literary theory that interrogates how the environment is engaged in literature. Cheryll Glotfelty is the father of eco-criticism in the United States of America while Jonathan Bate is considered the founder in England. The scarlet hibiscus and buzzing bees at Enugu garden represent regimented life of Eugene and his family while the purple hibiscus at Nsukka portrays intimacy and laughter felt in Aunty Ifeoma's family. The

buzzing bees in Nsukka garden lull Kambili to sleep but circumscribe Kambili's growth at Enugu and Abba. The harmattan shifts the setting from Enugu to Abba thus portraying the strained relationship between Eugene and his father, and his ambivalent philanthropic stance. The interaction of characters and the garden at Nsukka produce new personalities in Kambili and Jaja. Eugene's death is not mourned on the contrary his death serves to produce a happier Achike family. The environment is always a premonition to what a character will do or what will befall a character. The environment therefore shapes characters.

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