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Reframing African Pedagogical Practices through Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus: A Critical Exploration of Western and Indigenous Schooling Paradigms

Felistus Kaingi Kuvulya
Independent Researcher, Nairobi, Kenya.

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Corresponding author: Felistus Kaingi Kuvulya, Independent Researcher, Nairobi, Kenya.

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Abstract

This paper examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2004) with a focus on how the novelist represents colonial schooling within a postcolonial African context. Adichie, a globally acclaimed Nigerian author, is widely recognized as a central figure in postcolonial feminist literature whose works interrogate the intersections of culture, gender, religion, and identity. Influenced by Chinua Achebe's literary legacy, her writing reflects a blend of African and Western ideologies, often grounded in her Igbo heritage. The paper explores how Purple Hibiscus Critiques Western schooling and its complex impacts on African societies, particularly its role in shaping power dynamics and fostering ideological domination among the educated elite. Through the experiences of the young protagonists, Kambili and Jaja Achike, the novel reveals the tensions between imposed religious orthodoxy, patriarchal authority, and the search for personal freedom. Set against a backdrop of political and social unrest in Nigeria, the narrative highlights the paradox of material wealth coexisting with emotional repression and lack of genuine growth. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that Adichie presents education not merely as a tool for enlightenment but as a contested space where cultural identity, power, and resistance are negotiated, especially for women within patriarchal and postcolonial structures.

Keywords: Power, cultural hybridity, African pedagogy and Western schooling

Introduction

This study reviews secondary sources to evaluate scholarly perspectives on schooling as represented in literature, particularly within African literary contexts. The review reveals that schooling emerges as a dominant theme in African novels, often functioning as a site of tension between indigenous African values and Western-imposed systems. Scholars argue that Western schooling has contributed to the erosion and marginalization of African indigenous intellectual formation of children, which was originally rich in moral, cultural, and communal values.

The study adopts a value-based knowledge acquisition approach, which emphasizes equality, fairness, and respect for human dignity (UNESCO, 2017). Dewey (1916) asserts that academic formation should extend beyond knowledge transmission to nurture moral integrity, critical thinking, and social responsibility. Similarly, Freire (1970) emphasizes that education plays a key role in dismantling oppressive structures and promoting social

justice. Achebe (1973) reinforces the importance of indigenous schooling, particularly early childhood instruction in the mother tongue, as foundational to identity formation.

Gates (1992) critiques global divisions rooted in prejudice and advocates for schooling system that embraces cultural diversity while fostering shared human values. However, the manipulation of education systems has contributed to the emergence of ethically compromised elites and reinforced inequalities. Consequently, this study calls for a return to authentic, universal educational values that promote coexistence.

Within African literary discourse, Gikandi (2007) observes that colonial schooling enabled African writers to appropriate Western literary forms to assert cultural identity and resistance. Anders (2006) further notes that African writers transcend cultural boundaries, contributing to a global literary consciousness shaped by transculturation. However, this interaction also generated conflicts between indigenous and foreign value systems.

Postcolonial theorists such as Fanon (1959/2004) and Said (1978) critique colonial domination and emphasize the need to reclaim suppressed identities. African authors, as noted by Ebijuwa (1996), respond by affirming the authenticity and richness of African identity. Similarly, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o advocates for the decolonization of the mind and the rejection of cultural subservience (Mamdani, 2001).

Scholars further observe that colonial schooling disrupted African sociocultural systems, leading to identity crises and cultural alienation (Nendauni, 2016). Literary texts of digital scholars such as Nervous Conditions, and Purple Hibiscus illustrate schooling as both a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of control. While Western schooling has enabled social mobility, it has also perpetuated inequality and cultural dislocation.

Adichie's Purple Hibiscus critiques the lingering effects of colonialism, capitalism, and religious extremism (Musila, 2016). The novel demonstrates how schooling,when intertwined with authoritarian structures, can suppress individuality while also offering possibilities for resistance and transformation.

This paper is grounded in postcolonial literary theory, complemented by Afrocentric and Eurocentric perspectives. Afrocentric theory emphasizes the centrality of African values and cultural identity in interpreting African experiences (Asante, 1980). In contrast, Eurocentric theory has historically privileged Western epistemologies, often portraying African systems as inferior.

Postcolonial theory provides a critical lens for examining the legacies of colonialism and their impact on identity, culture, and intellectual development. It encompasses multiple strands, including cultural, ethnic, national, racial, and gender perspectives (Hall, 1995). These strands enable a comprehensive analysis of how power, identity, and education intersect in literary texts.

This paper specifically employs a postcolonial feminist perspective to examine how academic formation intersects with gender and power. It explores how literary texts reveal patriarchal dominance, colonial prejudice, and gender inequalities, while also presenting schooling as a tool for social transformation.

This paper adopts a qualitative research design based on textual analysis of selected African novel Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2004). The paper employs close reading and interpretive analysis to examine representations of learning in plot development, characterization, and thematic construction. It comparatively analyzes African indigenous and Western education systems, highlighting their values, contradictions, and impacts on individuals and societies. By integrating insights from the literature review and theoretical framework, the paper investigates how schooling shapes identity, reinforces or challenges power structures, and influences moral and social development. The methodology enables a critical understanding of knowledge acquisition as a contested space within African literature.

The Portrayal of African Pedagogy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2004)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus (2004) presents a complex critique of African socialization processes; what may be termed "African schooling"—particularly in relation to gender roles, patriarchy, and domestic power structures. Through the character of Beatrice, Adichie illustrates how women are conditioned to endure violence and injustice in silence, a disposition deeply rooted in societal expectations. Beatrice's suffering at the hands of her husband Eugene reflects a system that normalizes male dominance while demanding female submission.

Eugene is revered within his community, earning the title "Omelora" for his philanthropy (Ouno et al., 2018, p. 9). His wealth and generosity elevate him to near demi-god status among members of his clan who depend on his material support. However, this public admiration contrasts sharply with his private brutality in correcting his wife and children. Despite his outward piety and social standing, Eugene routinely subjects his wife and children to violence. Above all he rejects his blood father and never supports him morally, intellectually or financially despite being aged. His actions exemplify what Spivak (1985) describes as patriarchal systems in which women are "spoken for or constructed as absent" (p. 21).

The opening scenes of the novel foreground Eugene's authoritarian temperament. His violent reaction to Jaja's perceived religious disobedience, throwing a missal and inadvertently breaking his wife Beatrice's figurines. I discuss that this reveals his intolerance and lack of remorse.

But Mama did not come into my room with a bag that held combs and hair oils and ask me to go downstairs. Instead, she said, 'Lunch is ready *Nne*.'I meant to say, 'I am sorry Papa broke your figurines,' but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama.' She nodded quickly, then shook her head to show that the figurines did not matter. They did though. 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. (Adichie 2004,10)

Beatrice's silent response underscores her internalized submission, shaped by societal expectations of womanhood. As Kambili observes, her mother's quiet endurance masks repeated abuse, reinforcing Brenda's (2007) characterization of Purple Hibiscus as a "voice-centered text" grounded in lived realities (p. 18). Adichie further critiques the gendered expectations embedded in African socialization. Women are held solely responsible for child-rearing outcomes, and any perceived failure is attributed to maternal inadequacy. Adichie ridicules such perception when Eugene denies his expectant wife moral support and prioritizes a courteous visit to the family spiritual director over seeking medical attention to his expectant wife.

We always dropped in to visit Father Benedict after Mass. 'Let me

stay in the car and wait, *biko*,' Mama said, leaning against the Mercedes. 'I feel vomit in my throat.' Papa turned to stare at her. I held my breath. 'Are you sure you want to stay in the car?' Papa asked. 'My body does not feel right,' she mumbled. 'I asked if you were sure you want to stay in the car?' Mama looked up. 'I'll come with you.' 'It's not that bad.' Papa's face did not change. He waited for her to walk to him and together they walked to the priest's house. (Adichie 2004,29)

In the above episode Adichie portrays African pedagogy as perpetuating male impunity, where men act above moral and social constraints. Eugene's religious devotion is juxtaposed with his cruelty, exposing a profound hypocrisy. His insistence on religious observance such as forcing his ill wife to visit Father Benedict demonstrates a prioritization of ritual over human compassion. Adichie further ridicules the male dominance when Eugene upon arrival home violently reproaches his expectant wife yet Beatrice does not run away until she is severely injured to the point of falling unconscious miscarriage.

I was in my room after lunch, when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' hand-curved bedroom door. I imagined the door had gotten stuck and Papa was trying to open it. I closed my eyes, and started to count. I was at nineteen when it stopped. I heard the door open. I stepped out of my room just as Jaja came out of his. We stood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice in his factory workers bought in bulk at the *Seme* Boarder. 'There is blood on the floor' Jaja said. Mama did not come home that night and Jaja and I had dinner alone. (Adichie 2004,33)

Pamla (2007) interprets such behavior as submission to a "patriarchal cult of femininity" (p. 7), where women are coerced into compliance under the guise of moral order.This dynamic legitimizes male violence as corrective discipline. Eugene's frequent assaults resulting in miscarriages and physical injuries highlight the extreme consequences of such beliefs. Seemingly, the normalization of this violence reveals a broader cultural endorsement of male authority.

The novel also exposes how superstition and communal beliefs reinforce patriarchal structures. Polygamy is often justified through misattributions of infertility or miscarriage to supernatural causes. As Beatrice recounts, members of the community encouraged her husband Eugene to take another wife, claiming her womb had been "tied" by witchcraft (Adichie, 2004, p. 20). Such narratives not only dehumanize women but also position them as adversaries to one another, fostering division and mistrust. Owomoyela (1996) aptly notes that men's actions often determine societal direction (p. 11), a reality reflected in Eugene's unchecked authority.

The consequences of this environment extend beyond Beatrice to her children. Kambili and Jaja grow up in fear, their emotional and psychological development shaped by their father's violence. Kambili's academic struggles following her mother's miscarriage illustrate the trauma inflicted by domestic abuse. As Freire (1984) argues, oppressive environments constrain individuals' capacity to transform their realities (p. 49), a condition evident in Kambili's initial silence and fear.

Despite this, Adichie introduces counter-narratives through characters like Aunty Ifeoma, who challenges patriarchal norms and advocates for autonomy and dignity. At least this has awaked Beatrice and she seemingly she learns to voice out her pain and seeks refuge to her sister-in-law when things are not working in her marriage.

The sound of a car driving towards the flat disrupted our peace. Amaka turned to look. 'Aunty Beatrice!' Mama was climbing out of a yellow unsteady-looking taxi. What was she doing here? Why was she wearing her rubber slippers all the way from Enugu? 'Mama, *o gini*? 'Did something happen?' I asked hugging her. Aunty Ifeoma came hurrying up to the verandah, she hugged Mama..'I do not know if my head is correct'. 'I got back from the hospital today.' 'The doctor told me to rest.' 'You were in hospital?' Aunty Ifeoma asked quietly. 'You know that small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne*?' 'Your father broke it on my belly.' My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it. 'To save it? What do you mean? 'I was six weeks gone.(Adichie 2005,247)

Her intervention marks a turning point, encouraging her sister-in – law Beatrice to reconsider her passive endurance. Akujobi (2011) suggests that motherhood often compels women to prioritize their children's welfare over personal freedom (p. 2); however, Adichie complicates this notion by showing that endurance without resistance can perpetuate harm.

Adiche challenges oppression in the climax of Beatrice's resistance poisoning Eugene at the end of the novel. This signals a radical rejection of oppression. Beatrice confesses of poisoning her husband Eugene but she is supported by her son Jaja.

'They did an autopsy,' she said. 'They have found the poison in your father's body'. 'Poison?' I said.' 'I started putting poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka.'Sisi got it for me.' The police came a few hours later for interrogation. Jaja did not wait for their questions; he told them he had used a rat poison, that he put it in Papa's tea. They allowed him to change his shirt before they took him away.'(Adichie 2004, 290)

While not endorsing violence, Adichie uses this act to underscore the limits of silent suffering. Jaja's subsequent confession and imprisonment further illustrate the collective burden of familial trauma. His sacrifice reflects an alternative model of masculinity grounded in protection rather than domination (Freire, 1992, p. 52). The model the text advocates male educated elites to embrace for social change.

Importantly, Adichie does not wholly dismiss African schooling. She acknowledges its positive aspects, such as communal solidarity, kinship ties, and care for the elderly. The communal celebrations during Christmas and the reverence for elders, as exemplified by Papa-Nnukwu's prayers, highlight values of generosity and interconnectedness.

We were always prepared to feed the whole village at Christmas so that none of the people who came would leave without eating and drinking to a reasonable level of satisfaction. But it was not only Papa who received visitors; the villagers trooped to every big house with a big gate. Sometimes they took plastic bowls with firm covers. It was Christmas. (Adichie 2004,56)

Ranger (1985) observes that African education embraces principles and ethics transmitted across generations (p. 51). These elements suggest that African education is not monolithic but contains both oppressive and emancipatory dimensions.

Ultimately, Purple Hibiscus critiques the aspects of African socialization that legitimize gender inequality and violence while affirming the need for transformation. Adichie calls for a re-evaluation of cultural practices to uphold human dignity, integrity,

and equality. As the novel demonstrates, no authentic system of education should sanction the abuse of one human being by another.

Colonial schooling and the formation of identity, discipline and social hierarchy in Adichie Purple Hibiscus (2004)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus presents colonial schooling as a complex and ambivalent force in postcolonial African society. While it empowers individuals particularly women it also produces contradictions when misappropriated by ideologically rigid elites. Through the contrast between characters such as Ifeoma and Eugene, Adichie interrogates both the liberatory and oppressive potentials of colonial schooling.

One of the most significant contributions of colonial schooling in the novel is the empowerment of women. Female characters such as Ifeoma, Amaka, and Kambili demonstrate intellectual independence, critical thinking, and moral courage. Ifeoma, a university lecturer, embodies the positive outcomes of formal learning. She resists her brother Eugene's material inducements and ideological control, choosing instead to uphold dignity and personal conviction.

As Muwati and Gambahaya (2012) observe, Colonial schooling affords female characters "freedom in selfhood" and the capacity for introspection (p. 103). This is evident in Ifeoma's refusal to abandon her father despite Eugene's religious extremism.

Furthermore, Western education fosters critical consciousness and challenges prejudice. Through Ifeoma's influence, Kambili and Jaja begin to question their father's rigid worldview, particularly his characterization of Papa-Nnukwu as a "pagan." Their exposure to alternative perspectives enables them to reassess inherited beliefs and embrace a more inclusive understanding of faith and culture. This transformation aligns with Nnoromele's (2002) notion of "remarking of self" through access to alternative discourses (p. 2)

Adichie also highlights the role of schooling in promoting human rights awareness and social activism. Ifeoma advocates support and care for her aged father and ridicules the societal elevation of men and regard as true heirs. Adichie challenges the irrational notion when she presents Ifeoma with the true character of a legitimate child of Papa Nnukwu as opposed to her brainwashed brother Eugene. Ifeoma educated she supports and cares for her aged father. Seemingly, her wonderful children showers their grandpa with love, joy and care true aspects of the family spirit.

This is what people say to the High God, the *Chukwu'*. 'Papa-Nnukwu said. 'Give me both wealth and a child but if I must choose one, give me a child because when my child grows, so will my wealth. Papa-Nnukwu stopped, turned to look back towards our house. '*Nekenem*, look at me.' 'My son owns that house that can fit in everyman in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate.' 'I should not have let him follow those missionaries.' 'Did I not go to the missionary school, too?' 'But you are a woman. You do not count.' 'Eh? So I don't count? Has Eugene ever asked about your aching leg? 'I joke with you, *nwa m*'.'Where would I be today if my *chi* had not given me a daughter?' Papa- Nnukwu paused. 'my spirit will intercede for you. (Adichie 2004,83)

Colonial schooling in this sense, becomes a tool for social transformation, echoing Fonchingong's (2006) assertion that it is "the pivot of social transformation" (p. 45). However, the novel simultaneously exposes the societal failures, such as elevating boy child over girl child which undermines the quality and purpose of authentic schooling in postcolonial contexts.

Despite its emancipatory potential, colonial schooling in Purple Hibiscus is also depicted as a vehicle for ideological indoctrination. Eugene exemplifies the dangers of uncritical assimilation. His rigid adherence to a distorted form of Christianity leads him to reject his cultural heritage and alienate his family. His action ranging from the condemnation of his father to the abuse of his wife and children reveal how education, when divorced from ethical grounding, can produce moral corruption rather than enlightenment. As Leonardo and Porta (2010) argue, colonial education often created elites who functioned as instruments of domination rather than agents of liberation.

Religion, as mediated through colonial education, is similarly problematized. Eugene's manipulation of Christian doctrine illustrates how faith can be weaponized to justify oppression. His insistence on confession for trivial matters, coupled with his preference for foreign clergy over indigenous priests, reflects internalized colonial hierarchies.

We went to morning mass and Papa wanted father Benedict to hear our confession. Papa said the parish priest in Abba was not spiritual enough. I went to the room and made my confession… 'For all I have said and what I forgot to say, I beg pardon from your hands and the hands of God.' 'Go on then you know it's a sin against the holy spirit to willfully keep something back at confession'. 'Yes father'. I nodded and stared back at the wall. 'Was there something I had done that Papa told him?' 'I spent more than fifteen minutes at my grandfather's house.' 'My grandfather is a pagan.' 'Did you eat any of the native foods sacrificed to idols?' 'No father.' (Adichie 2004, 105)

This aligns with Wall's (1927) observation that religious authority can be appropriated for self-aggrandizement. In contrast, characters such as Father Amadi present a more authentic and compassionate expression of faith, emphasizing love, inclusivity, and cultural integration.

Language also emerges as a critical site of contestation. The privileging of English and Latin over Igbo reflects broader colonial strategies of cultural domination. Adichie critiques this linguistic hierarchy through characters like Amaka, who resists adopting an English confirmation name and asserts the validity of African identity.

I told you am not taking an English name, father', she said. When missionaries came they didn't think Igbo names were good enough. They insisted that people take English names to be baptized. Now that father Amadi would be going to Germany for evagilization as a missionary, should we be moving ahead?' I will take an African name for my baptism *Chiamaka'* says God is beautiful, '*Chima*' says God knows best, *Chiebuka*' says God is greatest. 'Don't they all glorify God as much as 'Paul, Peter and Simon?' (Adichie 2004, 271)

This perspective resonates with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1981) argument that language is central to cultural identity and intellectual freedom. Moreover, the novel exposes the economic and political implications of colonial schooling. Eugene's role as a newspaper publisher illustrates how educated elites may serve neocolonial interests. His wealth, derived from external affiliations, contrasts sharply with the poverty of his community, highlighting the unequal distribution of resources under capitalist systems. This reinforces Hall's (1980) assertion that colonial education produced a bureaucratic class aligned with external

powers.

Conclusion

Purple Hibiscus presents a nuanced exploration of education as both a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of control. The novel affirms that Western education has contributed positively to African societies by promoting literacy, critical thinking, women's empowerment, and global interconnectedness. It has enabled individuals to challenge oppressive traditions, advocate for human rights, and engage with broader intellectual discourses.

However, the text equally cautions against the uncritical adoption of Western values. Through characters like Eugene, Adichie demonstrates how education can be manipulated to reinforce oppression, cultural alienation, and moral decay. Similarly, African indigenous education, while rich in communal values such as kinship, respect, and moral responsibility, is shown to have its own limitations, including gender bias and reliance on certain stereotypes.

Ultimately, the novel advocates for a balanced and integrative approach to schooling one that synthesizes the strengths of both African and Western systems while rejecting their shortcomings. Adichie calls for schooling grounded in authenticity, ethical responsibility, and cultural inclusivity. Such an approach is essential for fostering a just and equitable society in postcolonial Africa and beyond.

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