

Literary Art as a Vehicle for the Diffusion of Cultural Imperialism in the Nigerian Society: The Example of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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This paper takes a cursory look at the conceptual framework of what cultural imperialism entails with particular study of its socio-political consequences in contemporary Nigerian society, and a closer look at the transportation and importation of western cultural values and the implantation of same in Nigeria thereby almost completely eclipsing the hitherto African cultural conservatism of the Nigerian state. Clear examples of this cultural transplant are given in this work, including but not limited to the use of English language in place of the indigenous languages for communication even when there are no foreigners, smoking of cigarettes, ladies putting on trousers, abortions as a means of birth control, free premarital and extramarital sexual relationships, and homosexuality and gay practices. These which were viewed as an anathema to Nigeria's cultural values have supplanted the traditional conservatism of the Nigerian people. This work particularly looks at Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and distills classical cases of cultural imperialism. Adichie through the character Eugene, captures cultural imperialism as seen in the life of this vastly brainwashed "been-to" who is clearly portrayed as an imperial lackey, capitalist, and apologist. Also, the character of Rev. Father Benedict, a Briton, who often found any indigenous songs in St. Agnes Parish was quite offensive. The work also captures cultural imperialism in the ironical contempt with which the catholic devotee, Eugene, treats his own father, Papa Nnukwu, steeped in the traditional African cultural values, and Eugene views him as Godlessness. The essay concludes by identifying the cultural crises that cultural imperialism creates in the Nigerian state, and recommends ways of diluting and diffusing the present cultural imperialism as a solution to the myriad of socio-political crises currently experienced by the Nigerian society.

Keywords: culture, cultural imperialism, cultural values, *Purple Hibiscus*

Introduction

Cultural imperialism is an integral part of the larger concept of imperialism, which on its own, entails the political territorial and geographical subjugation of the will, independent and sovereignty of a less powerful state, to the political will, political control, and authority of a more powerful state. This implies beyond loss of political

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territorial, economic, social, and cultural controls by the lesser state or group to the whims of the superior state, even sometimes, in capricious dimensions. Classical examples abound in history of the concept of imperialism of Europe, and more currently American imperialism over African and Asian states. It may sound funny and sometimes, senseless but the truth must be told that the Berlin Conferences of 1884 and 1885 were direct affronted to civilization, intellectualism, and the acclaim of Renaissance—that is rebirth in learning. For if there was a rebirth of learning, such learning must have been an upside down conception of learning or else how one can explain how the major nations of Europe, in pursuit of their obviously “blind” economic and political drive for prominence, could have come to the conclusion that it was unnecessary to consult or defer to the indigenes of Africa described as the Black race as they met and deliberated over the political, economic, social, and cultural future of the great continent of Africa. In their decisions to share up the territory of Africa, they certainly need input from Africa itself before the inexplicable balkanization. Perhaps, if they had consulted as many as people, they would not have divided united ethnic groupings into two different or more political entities. An eloquent example of this assertion is the balkanization of the Yoruba race into Dahomey controlled by the French and Nigeria controlled by the British.

Each territory the European imperialists took over, either with the brutality of the military might, as in the case of the colony of Lagos, or with the helplessness of those that surrendered without a fight, as in the cases of the protectorates of northern and southern Nigeria, was completely brought not only under political, territorial, geographical, and economic control, but from the imperialist forces directly and indirectly impacted upon the territory of occupation in respect of the socio-cultural values of such colonized territories. The concept of cultural imperialism is therefore an outflow from the more foundational and larger in scope concept of imperialism. It is therefore, the intention of this work to critically appraise the concept of cultural imperialism with a view to distill and isolate some various possible ways in which cultural imperialism may have negatively impacted on the socio-political life of the nation, Nigeria. The debut work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provides a classical platform for the exposition of some of these threads of cultural imperialism, and explores possible avenues of limiting or completely diffusing the unwarranted consequences of this cultural invasion on the socio-political life of Nigeria, which happens to be the setting of Adichie's cultural work.

Conceptual Clarification

The concept of culture in its simplest of term means the way of life of the people. For culture to be relevant, it must be appropriated to a particular definable community of people. For instance, the matrilineal cultural roles of succession of the *Twi* people of southern Ghana. It is specifically appropriated to the *Twi* people. It is true that culture may acquire inter-temporal and sometimes, inter-spatial characteristics. One thing is certain about culture; culture is a mirror of acceptable usage. It is a mirror of acceptable usage because through culture, a scholar or visitor to a given community may be in a position to appreciate or understand the true values of a society which is the subject matter of study or inquest.

Culture, therefore, means the way and manner a particular people live their lives, such as the way they eat, the way they build, the way they dress, the nature of their housing, their mode of transportation, the food they eat, the way they share things, their ceremonies, the way they marry or give away in marriage, the way they speak their language, the way they sing their songs, the way they dance, the way they bury their loved ones, the type of

occupation or work they are engaged in, their rules of paternity, their rules of administration of estates, especially in cases of intestate succession, rules related to adoption, rules related to crafts and works of art, rules relating to education, folklore, literature, and learning. In short, the concept of culture is an all pervading concept. To know a people entails the study of their culture for in it, lies the wisdom, values, and morals that inspire their conducts or action. It is, therefore, instructive that the easiest way to run into socio-political crisis in any community will be to pretend that their cultural values or heritage are of no moment and perhaps, may be viewed as barbaric.

In Nigeria's post 1914 amalgamation experience, the British discovered that they could run into cultural brick walls and therefore, invented the indirect rule system through which they, the British, did not need to deal directly with the people of the various communities of the protectorates of Nigeria. Obviously, among the various justification for the introduction of the indirect rule system, apart from it being a cost saving effort and providing the solution to the paucity of British personnel, the more significant factor but little talked about was the fact that the British did not understand the culture of the various communities in Nigeria, and they conveniently made no serious efforts in that direction as they viewed the cultural practices of the various communities in Nigeria, as not only anachronistic but also barbaric.

Culture is of a dynamic nature as it changes from place to place, and from generation to generation. What may be culturally accepted in Kumasi of Ghana may be viewed as culturally reprehensible in the Nigerian city of Calabar. It is important to note that what may be acceptable culture today may have been viewed with revulsion, 100 years ago, in a given community. Another significant attribute of culture is the character of acceptability. For a particular culture to be valid or relevant, it must be acceptable to the people of the community where such a culture is situated. For instance, the Hindus predominantly in India culturally practice cremation, that is, they burn the remains of the dead until it is reduced to just ashes, but such a cultural practice will be viewed as repugnant to the sensibilities of the Ibibio people of Nigeria.

Culture represents "the language, beliefs, values, norms, behaviours, and even material objects that are passed from one generation to the next" (Henslin, 1995, p. 35). Culture in this respect will include material objects that distinguish a group of people like the buildings, works of art, machinery, clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, utensils, and weapons. While the non material culture includes the community's ways of thinking like its beliefs, values, and other assumptions about the world, and its common patterns of behaviour including language and other forms of interaction. Culture, according to Rothkopf (1997), is quite dynamic and often grows out of a systematically encouraged reverence for selected customs and habits. In other words, no present day culture is a product of merely one historic or political source, rather people continually re-establish their culture by what they choose to accept.

Cultural imperialism, on the other hand, has been defined by Hamm and Smandych (2005), White (2001) as the domination of one culture over another other by a deliberate policy or by economic or technological superiority. According to Pellerin (2006), cultural imperialism "can take the form of a general attitude or an active, formal and deliberate policy, even including (or resulting from) military action. It can also be due to economic or technological factors". Cultural imperialism therefore arises where there is a deliberate attempt to downplay an extant culture of a group or community in preference for the cultural values of an imperial power. It was this experience that the various cultural groups in most part of Africa, including what Nigeria went through and it is still going through as a result of the compulsive transplantation of their cultural values with the colonial

masters' values. With particular reference to Nigeria, several cultural taboos were introduced by the British and in fact, became the order of the day as a result of the ethnocentrism of the perfidious Albion. Ethnocentrism, in this respect, means the use of one's own culture as a yardstick for judging the way of other individuals, groups, or communities, generally leading to a negative evaluation of their values, norms, and behaviour.

There is no gain saying the fact that the sudden intrusion towards the end of the 19th century all through the 20th century and through the current period of neocolonialism had created an abrupt cultural shock for the indigenes of the invaded cultures of Nigeria. Cultural shock refers to "the disorientation that people experience when they come in contact with a fundamentally different culture and can no longer depend on their taken-for-granted assumptions about life" (Henslin, 1995, p. 36). To this end, the impact of the intruding imperialist culture of courtship and dating introduced by the British was hardly understood by the disoriented young generations of Nigeria. This to a large extent accounts for a high incidence of premarital sexual gratification among the youth. This has also resulted to unwanted pregnancies, illegal abortions, and sometimes, though sadly, premature death of the teenage girls.

The above example is but one of several socio-political crises that was engendered by cultural imperialism. In fact, this has been didactively captured by the celebrated debut work of Chimamanda Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*.

Cultural Imperialism in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004)

This work deliberately avoided giving so many other instances of cultural imperialism in Nigeria in the abstract as the work, the subject matter of this study is replete with so many instances of cultural shocks arising from the imposition of the imperialist culture on the Nigerian cultural system. To understand the work itself, it is necessary to start with the author.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in the post-independent Nigeria, precisely 1977. Her background of growing up and substantially being educated in Nigeria, from primary to university, where she was engaged in the study of Medicine in one of the Universities in Nigeria afforded her a grand opportunity of experiencing first hand, the true consequences of cultural imperialism. She has published short stories in literary magazines in Nigeria, the UK, and USA, where she relocated to and curiously made a switch to the humanities where she picked a degree in Mass Communication instead of completing her studies in the medical science. This switch may yet prove to be one of the most significant of her life decisions as a study of *Purple Hibiscus* her debut work, which is already drawing subtle comparisons to the works of one of the masters of African literature, Chinua Achebe. She has tried to echo through her delicate manipulation of syntax, throb and her control of irony, and suspense and her mastery of those cultural details that have positioned her work worthy of literary appraisal, especially in the area of the clash of cultures between the imperialist West and the indigenous African value system.

The setting of the work is Nigeria but particularly the eastern part of Nigeria with Enugu, the Capital of the former Eastern region as the most prominent setting for this work. The novel captures amongst other themes and issues the trauma of conflict and clashes of cultural values in a family setting of one of Nigeria's wealthy elitist families. It clearly brings out the clash of values between the father of the home, Eugene had imbibed not only the invading imperialist culture while growing up in colonial Nigeria, but his sojourn in Britain for further studies

had completely disoriented the “been-to” culturally and easily pitted him against the cultural realities of his Igbo ethnic group, and that of his extended and nuclear family as can be seen in the revulsion with which he held his father, Papa Nnukwu. In fact, the clash of cultures is reflected by the sharp contrast between Eugene, who represents the dominant tunes of the Western culture and his aged father who represents the “aging” fast receding cultural values of the black man in Nigeria. It will not be over presumptuous to say that the sad emasculation of the African culture by the cultural values of western civilization has greatly contributed to the breakdown and crisis of the socio-political life of contemporary Nigeria.

Adichie shows mastery of Catholicism most likely from her background of a devote Catholic. She portrays Christianity and particularly the conservatism of Catholicism, especially the brand from the West without an admixture of some Africanness as another brand. Clearly representative of this brand of cultural values of the West is the character, Father Benedict, who is an epitome of ethnocentrism. Father Benedict's lack of interest in studying the cultural heritage of the “Godless” people he had come from England to evangelize was clearly pictured in contrast to the character of the young and newly ordained Priest who was invited by Father Benedict as a visiting Priest to take charge of Mass on Pentecost Sunday in St. Agnes Parish (Adichie, 2004). Contrary to his friend's, Father Benedict, insistence on English songs and choruses during Mass completely stopping the use of indigenous songs and choruses, the young Priest, half way through his sermon, broke into an Igbo song, “*Bunie ya enu...*” (Adichie, 2004, p. 28), to the shock of the indigenous audience that had been browbeaten to accept the English songs as the only medium of spiritual transcendence to heaven. Predictably, this action of the young Priest also pitted him against the unrepentant “been-to” and fanatic, Eugene, who rather viewed the Priest as a Godless leader. To him, the young Priest represents Godlessness for that singular act of deference to Igbo cultural value of indigenous songs. In his words, “That young Priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him” (Adichie, 2004, p. 29).

The clash of cultures is also depicted in the home of Eugene who hardly spoke the indigenous language with strong preference for English language as opposed to his wife, Beatrice who does not only speak the indigenous language but also sings songs in Igbo, especially when her husband is not around. Beatrice's lifestyle was opposed to her husband's conservative expectation of Western cultural comportment in carriage and speech. For instance, she sang a praise song in Igbo, “*O me mma, Chineke, O me mma...*” (Adichie, 2004, p. 39), and hugged Jaja and Kambili, her son and daughter, to welcome them back home from school at the end of a term.

The conservative cultural values bring together Eugene and Father Benedict as opposed to the other two classes that resulted on account of this clash in cultures. While the two men represent the first class, that is the conservative Western culture, a second class evolves which is made up of those who have accepted some values of the Western culture and some of the African indigenous culture. This class is represented by the Young Priest, Aunty Ifeoma and her children, Beatrice and her children, Father Amadi, and others, especially in St. Agnes Parish. This group promotes their indigenous cultural values of respect for elderly people, humility and submission by the women, communalism as opposed to the individualism of the West, as seen in pages 83, 90 to 91, 94 to 95, and 172, of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. This group also admires the enlightenment and sophistry, shown basically in Christian religion, education, and technology development, of Western culture and civilization. Perhaps, they represent what Karl Marx had in mind when he viewed religion as “the opium of the

people". The third class is represented by Papa Nnukwu, a representative of the fast fading group that believes absolutely in the African cultural values and belief system.

The religion of the Christian God certainly has lots of advantages but the hypocrisy of its adherents as can be seen in Eugene's remonstrance and condemnation of his own wife expectant in her last trimester for feeling too ill and tired to follow him after Mass to the parsonage for his usual ritual of visiting Father Benedict each Sunday after Mass. His insistence was un-Christ-like. Scholars of Christian Religious Studies would not fail to recognize the hollowness or mere ritualistic compliance with religious or sacramental standards. This is quite ironical as Jesus Christ represents the deepest epitome of love. As a king, He could leave his home above to die for sinners like Eugene. Is it not paradoxical that such love could not reflect in the way he related with his wife, children, and extended family, especially his own father whom he despised so much for his belief in African traditional religion, culture, and values? He refused to visit his father when he was sick despite his elitist and intellectual sophistry. His high-mindedness and unrequited love caused Papa Nnukwu a broken heart and deep sorrow which affected his health and finally led to his death. Ironically, it was the same father that Eugene made a big public show of and spared no expenses in giving him a "befitting" and glamorous funeral.

Adichie is a master at the manipulation of plots to drive home the ironies and paradoxes that arise out of this clash of cultures. This can be seen during the visit of Eugene and his wife to the Igwe of his village. The wife curtsied to greet the Igwe (King) and Eugene felt a sense of revulsion and reprimanded her openly for bowing to "a mere human being" (Adichie, 2004, p. 93) making a reference to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, verse five. The plot played out itself where the heroine, Kambili, in attempt to please her father, afterwards, refuses to bow and kiss the ring of the Bishop at Awka (Adichie, 2004, p. 94). Kambili, who had witnessed the reprimand of her mother by her father, was shocked at the father for angrily yanking her ear for disgracing him and dishonouring God by not bowing to the Bishop. What arrant contradiction and unctuous hypocrisy. The Igwe as well as the Bishop are both men created by God. Both are respected leaders in their respective socio-cultural settings.

The character of Eugene may not be an exact representation of the quintessential protagonist of the cultural superiority of the western culture over African indigenous culture. This fictional character may not be necessarily, intentionally, have been advocating "everything good" in the British cultural values. He can also be viewed as a victim of the cultural crises that result when a foreign culture forcefully replaces an indigenous culture as was the case in Nigeria and most African countries. In fact, Africans like Eugene may be perceived as psychopaths, directly suffering from psychological crisis on account of the invasion of his original, indigenous cultural values by a foreign culture hardly understood by such victims.

It must also be observed that Adichie has painted a disagreeable picture of worship sections in contemporary Catholic and other Christian churches. For in contemporary worship services, in such churches, there has been undeniable transcendence of indigenous cultural values through the native songs and languages, clapping of hands and drumming and even services conducted entirely in the indigenous languages. Perhaps, Adichie's elitist background has prevented her from capturing and reflecting on such cultural realities, especially in the rural areas.

Conclusion

The crises of cultural imperialism clearly depict the lack of learning or an upside down conceptualization of knowledge acquired for only selfish ends. For in spite of the renaissance or the rebirth of learning, the European powers could sit at their various conferences, especially epitomized by the Berlin Conferences and decide the fate of other peoples of the world without any deference to them. This act of ethnocentrism allowed the imperial powers including Britain in their pursuit of self interest to be blinded to the need to study and take advantage of the unique and rich indigenous cultures of the African people. The theory of conflict between cultures and the consequent crisis, like destruction of family life, communalism, love to one's fellow men, and respect to elders which were taken-for-granted orientations of the African culture suffered disorientation and cultural shocks as a result of cultural imperialism.

In fact, Adichie has in her brilliant combination of irony, syntax, and suspense, completely manipulated *Purple Hibiscus* to reflect the crises engendered by cultural imperialism and in several ways, scholars have been called on to seek the diffusion of such crises through a mid-course of accepting the positive values from both cultural orientations. Her work is also a call for the avoidance of religious fanaticism and extremism. This has become so germane to Nigeria buffeted by current religious crisis in Jos and the octopus-like bombings of *Boko Haram*. This work therefore calls for restraint, tolerance, co-existence, and the spirit of togetherness for there to be peace and prosperity in Nigeria.

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