

The Role of Language in Nation
Building: a Critical Analysis of Adichie's
Purple Hibiscus

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Abstract

Language plays a significant role in the building of a nation state. Since language is the portrait of a human thought, it reflects the quality of thought generated in a society in order to understand as well as find out the important roles language plays in nation's building using Adiche's hibiscus. This paper will first adopt a definitive approach in order to achieve a generic meaning to the key concepts seen in this paper. After thorough discussion of these concepts, their place in *purple hibiscus* will be finally buttressed. This powerful, yet subtle novel is striking on two levels: one s the subjection of society to the tyranny of the chaos that results from a political coup; the second is the role of family in the formation of children's lives, contrasting a monstrous discipline with the guidance of loving relatives. The political unrest, the quest for nation building, and subsequent difficulties of daily survival are the canvas against which the author presents or writes this poseful and sophisticated novel.

Keywords: *Language, Nation building,
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Introduction

Language could be defined as a human system of communication that uses arbitrary signals, such as voice sound, gestures or written symbols. It is as Martinet (1970) stated “a formidable instrument of communication of vocal character by which human experience is analyzed in a given community”. A community may be small or big, but the only effective tool of communication that integrates both human and non-human elements in such community is language. According to Onwukwe (2009:1), she describes language as “a means of communication by means of arbitrary vocal symbols used by speakers of one speech community”. In the same vein Crystal (1998:10) sees language as “human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purposes of communication”. Similarly, Richard and Rodgers (1995:36) assert that language is “a vehicle for communicating meanings and messages”. From the views of these scholars, one could undoubtedly ascertain that language is the only tool that differentiates man from the rest of other creatures because it is an important tool for national identity and that which promotes man's culture. Language is an effective tool for national identity and integration and it plays a major role in nation building.

Nation Building/ Development

Nation building refers to the process of constructing a national identity using the power of state. This process aims at the unification of the people within the state so that it remains politically stable and viable in the long run. Nation building can involve the use of propaganda and economic growth. Similarly, it is the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions and physical structures that elucidate history and culture concretize and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of the nation.

Originally, nation building referred to the effort of newly-independent nations, notably the nations of Africa, to reshape colonial territories that had been carved out by colonial powers without them become viable and coherent entities. Nation building included the creation of national paraphernalia such as flags, anthems, national days, national stadium, national airlines, national language and national myths. At a deeper level, national identity needed to be deliberately constructed by the molding different groups into a nation especially since colonialism had used divide and rule tactics to maintain.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Nation Building

“Purple Hibiscus” by Chimamanda Adichie is a Nigerian novel used in this work to portray the developing feelings in the country for democracy. The focus of this paper is a reflection of the family in Nigeria but it is also the story of Nigeria itself. The struggles and suffering that the family is going through is the mirror of what the country itself is going through. The father in the story is violent and autocratic as is the government. The *“purple hibiscus”* of the title is the symbol of the developing feelings in the country for democracy. The *“purple hibiscus”* is described as the symbol for freedom freedom to be and freedom to do. There is a lot of violence in the book but it ends with the emergence of a freer state of things for both family and country.

Purple Hibiscus is a mirror through which we see the struggle and hurdles that Nigeria as a nation state suffers through the stages of development. It is a novel that portrays a political satire and a call for change for a nation suffering under a lack of free speech.

The development in Nigerian politics as buttressed in the novel (extracted from <http://www.gradesaver.com/purplehibiscus/study-guide/maor-hemes/> both Kambili and the nation are on the course of dramatic changes. The political climate of Nigeria and the internal drama of the Achike family are interasined. After Nigeria declared independence from Britain in 1960, a cycle of violet coups and military dictatorship led to civil war, which led to a new cycle of bloody unrest. Even democracy is hindered by the widespread of corruption in the government. In *purple Hibiscus*, there is a coup that culminates in military rule. Papa and his paper, the standards are critical of the corruption that is ushered in by a leader who is not elected by the people. Ironically, papa is a self-righteous dictator in his own home. He is wrathful towards his children when they stray from his chosen path for them. In the wake of Coker's death, papa beats Kambili so severely that she is hospitalized in critical condition. Both in Nigeria and in the home, violence begets violence. Kambili and Jaja are kept away from the unrest at first. They witness protests, deadly roadblocks and harassment from the safety of their cars. But when they arrive Nsukka, they were thrust in political debate. Obiora says the university is a microcosm for Nigeria-ruled by one man with all the power. Pay had been withheld from the professors and light and power are shut off frequently. Medical workers and technicians go on strike and food prices rise. There are rumors that the sole administrator is misdirecting funds intended for the university. This is a parallel to what is happening in the country at large. Kambili and Jaja now understand firsthand the struggle of their cousins. The personal becomes political, and vice versa.

Adichie further explicates the key political figures fictionalized in *Purple Hibiscus* as could be seen who directly or indirectly contributed to nation building. Adichie has acknowledged that Ade Coker's life and death are made to both Dele Giwa a murdered journalist and Ken Saro-Wiwa. Sara-Wiwa was a poet and author. We protected on behalf of the Ogoni people against the environmental ruin of their ancestral home caused by oil drilling. Saro-Wiwa was an outspoken critic against the government and was arrested and hanged under Abacha's rule. Amaka's beloved Fela Ransome Kuti is one of the best known Nigeria musicians. Like papa, Kuti was created Afro beat, a style of music that blends jazz with traditional African. He railed against the colonial mentality of his upbringing and advocated for both a return to traditions and democracy. He was arrested, beaten and tortured several times for opening criticizing the government. The popularity of his music was seen as a threat to the military establishment.

The Role of Language in Nation Building

Language has played a significant role in the rise and fall of a nation. It presents human kind with a variety of possibilities. Since language is the portrait of human, it reflects the quality of thought generated in a society. Training in language therefore, enables an individual to express his thoughts in the most eloquent way. But a person has to learn to

think before learning to express. The skill of driving has to accompany the ability to know or remember directions. Without the ability to navigate, even a good driver will be lost. The selection of language tools used to express thought reflects the priorities of a person or for that matter a nation. The quality and quantity of language is a barometer of intellectual health of the people.

There are two types of language skills, each having its own specific role to play in the society. The growth of a society depends on the importance given to each of them. The first type of language is BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills). This is to interact with others in the society. Many forms language that concerns with human relations fall under this category. BICS is concerned with human feelings, social and religious arguments and entertainment. Political and religious rhetoric fall under this category. It is a tool used to arouse feelings in humans, convincing them to take up a certain task. The other type of language used to express human thought is CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). Whereas BICS is concerned with human emotions and social issues, CALP is the language of science.

However, the novel *Purple Hibiscus* deals adeptly with the theme of language. It is written in English and flavored with Igbo, the local language that Kambili's family speaks. The result is a text that seems richer and more layered than it would have otherwise, but there is more to this. Characters speak English in formal settings and Igbo in informal ones. The father rarely speaks Igbo. Sometimes when he is angry he speaks in Igbo; other times he says a very long prayer in English. (Norah Vawter, 10 November 2004). Adichie makes frequent use of Igbo language to strengthen her point about Nigerian roots and culture, intensify her narrative with various words and phrases which add depth and authenticity to the story; on the one hand, Eugene speaks English as a way of being superior, but when he is angry with his children he addresses them in Igbo though he forbids them to use it themselves. (epinions-Lifting the Silence-Dec.18th, 2005).

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* is a revolutionary novel which seeks to reawaken people to the realities of the time in which they live. The novelist chooses for imagery the colour purple which not only symbolises royalty but also death. To unmask the truism of our frailties, the novelist chooses the family set up which represents the nation to do a scattering work which for the most part becomes a blistering indictment on our nation Nigeria nay humanity. Papa and his family is a model of not too realistic a personage. They are religious pundits even when it hurts religious dictates must be obeyed. Papa appears more catholic, than the pope himself. Religious for him must be pursued to its very letter even when it hurts. It is therefore not religion for man for religion religion. It is religious bigotry is imposed on the entire family man, Jaja and the personal. Religion as practiced by papa become offensive, so much so that the sensibilities of members of the family are offended. Although mama and the personae do not voice their resistance, Jaja dares Papa on all fronts as regards religious bigotry family ties and interpersonal relationships. For Jaja, religion must have a human face, thus Jaja finds the water nauseating. The novelist declares like Achebe that "Things Started to fall at home..." p3.

The family activities are laden with church activities and the furniture is made up of “heavy missal” “figurines and etagre”. The palm fronds Ash Wednesday are other religious registers that till the passages of the novel. Papa's highhandedness can be seen by the stiff atmosphere in the house. People are to recite the credo in Latin even when they do not understand Latin “Father Benedict had changed things in the parish, such as insisting that the credo and kyrie be recited only in Latin; Igbo was not acceptable” p4.

The fact that Igbo was not acceptable show vestiges of colonialism. Credo which means “I believe in God”. It is better to say credo than to use the English version of the service. Igbo becomes a taboo. Brother Eugene Papa, the mushroom Pentecostal churches; then they listened intently, quietly” p5 “The whirl of the ceiling fan” p6

The heavy glass shows the artificial nature of life used by Papa “The heavy glass, heavy glass. It shook, as did the palm fronds on it”. P6. The “sagging breast” p7.

The influence of bilingualism is seen in the use of many Igbo words in the novel. “Nne ngwa, go and change”, come and help me biko” p8 gbo 1

Aunty Ifeoma says that “Papa was too much of a colonial product”. Papa does not change. He feels that anything Igbo is local that is why Latin is preferred to English and Igbo is completely outlawed. Now Aunty Ifeoma's family is established as control experimental family. Her family is considered like “Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves” p3

Papa “hardly spoke Igbo”. This is a vestige of colonialism.

“Ozugo stop coughing” p14. The way Adiche fuses Igbo into English is rather amazing. However, this may pose a problem to a non – Igbo speaker. Ofe nsala is a watery peppery soup that is very delicious. Without a glossary it may be difficult to decode some of this Igbo slangs. However, the use of these Igbo words shows a form of decolonisation the part of writer.

Papa Nnukwu is introduced to restore tradition “Ozugo, it is enough” p.181. Papa's body is considered the body of a heathen by his son Eugene p.182.

“Papa Nnukwu was an *Ozu*, a corpse“ P.186, he was the *nwoke* in the mortuary.

“I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral” p186.

Uncle Eugene who is also called Papa in the novel will disown his father just to please the Whiteman and will desecrate anything in his traditional law and custom to defend a faith from the writer's point of view, he does not impress uncle Eugene. No doubt he does not have an Igbo name. The sister is aunt Ifeoma while Papa is Uncle Eugene.

Father Amadi could play football with ordinary people, father Amadi could mix up with other people while Uncle Eugene a mere parishioner is segregative and would not mix up with other people “thinking about corn and *ube*” p.126

A plastic container of *aku, anara leaves*” p126

“sit down mounye m” p243

People who wanted to thong in for Mgbalu to commiserate with us...p281

Papa was poisoned by his own wife because of his highhandedness p.283

“I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka
sis got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor” p283

This aspect of the novel calls for revolution. It shows that a tyrant stands the risk of people rising up against him even within family circles. Politicians are not spared. They are to learn from uncle Eugene whose son Jaja rose against. The sister Aunty Ifeoma would not agree to his Whiteman's style of life. Aunt Ifeoma though a university lecturer living within the university campus has a more realistic and down to earth life style than Eugene who leads a glass life. A life that is frail and fragile. The story shows the various nature of Jaja who wears a Jesus figure to die in place of the mother. He goes to prison in place of the mother.

Style

Planned Repetition

The table was glass, heavy glass alliteration she had changed from her sequined Sunday. There is the use of alliteration to achieve rhythm as “Sequined Sunday” p.7. The “Purple plants” p.9 “Sickly sweet scent” p.9

Onomatopoeia as “in the whir of the ceiling fan” p.7

Personification-“vibrant bushes” p.9

“Sleep buds” is also a case of selectional rule violation “sleep” is a lexical item use for animate objects, thus it is a violation to ascribe it to buds which is inanimate.

Conclusion

Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus* is a master piece in which the writer use the family as microcosm to launch a blistering attack on the nation which is a macrocosm. She does this in well crafted language a blend of true bilingualism which adumbrates the nation's colonial traits. The first person point of view is carefully and artistically used to criticize the tyrannical stance of Papa. It is therefore, a truism that any tyrannical set up must one day crumble.

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