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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Freedom, Love and Sexual Awakening in Kambili: An Account of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Samir Kumar Mahato

The current article focuses on religious oppression and patriarchal dominance being imposed on a fifteen-year-old girl Kambili and her desperate search for freedom. She attains freedom and eventually with awakening sexuality she falls in love with an African priest Father Amadi. Though one-sided, it lifts the silence from her world, truths are revealed and a woman comes out from mere flesh and blood.

Purple Hibiscus (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is exclusively a novel about the strong bondages of family, adolescent love and sexual awakening of a fifteen-year-old girl Kambili against a backdrop of domestic violence and military coup in Nigeria. She and her elder brother Jaja lead an apparently advantaged life in Enugu totally devoid of the turmoil of the world. Though in Kambili's venture, there is difference between what it appears to be and what it really is. Her Papa Eugene Achike is caring and equally renowned, yet he is an offshoot of colonialism, a religious fanatic. Patriarchal dominance and religious oppression result into violent psychological turmoil and physical abuses in Kambili, Jaja and their mother Beatrice.

Kambili is not allowed to step beyond her schedule fixed by her father. She and her brother do not have any access to recreation apart from regular prayers, going to masses, visit to Abba ones in a year and meeting with Papa-Nnukwu (within fifteen allotted minutes). Though at times Jaja seems to be defiant of his catholic father, Kambili does not possess the strength of mind to be as per with her brother. She always thinks in terms of her father like an obedient daughter. In any respect coming second in her class is not permissible. When at one term, any how she becomes second next to Chinwe Jideke, Papa visits her school and explains in front of the class that while both of them possesses one singular head each Kambili should always come first, the vice-versa is not acceptable in his logic. As it is hammered into her psyche she comes first in the very next term and later on again in spite of being hospitalised on account of severe beating by her father. Time and again words choke in her throat as she is aware of her place and likes to maintain her silence. In their family, there are too many things which are usually not talked about and remain behind the doors as that of Jaja's finger and their mother's miscarriages. Kambili and her brother are quiet, well-mannered, high achievers that their father points to with pride. Yet Kambili is taunted by her peers and scorned by her outspoken cousin Amaka because she is rendered as a privileged 'snob'. She does not have any access to her own world, her own words and is pervaded by silence all around.

Religious oppression looms large when before the Eucharistic fast ends her period starts. She eats corn flakes in supervision of her mother to have a Panadol, but her father catches them red handed and severely bits all of them with his belt including Jaja who takes the charge as his own. Kambili is put to confess before Father Benedict as according to his religious father it is a sin committed against the God. Later, when in Aunt Ifeoma's house, Kambili along with her brother stays with sick Papa-Nnukwu, claimed by her father as a heathen in spite of Aunt Ifeoma's defending him as a traditionalist, under a roof, she is treated with hot water on her feet to cleanse her sin.

At this backdrop Kambili longs for fresh air which is dangerously missing in their house. She daydreams while looking at the several fruit and flower trees in her yard. On her own account-

Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all; Auntie Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Auntie 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 chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (PH 16)

When she visits Auntie Ifeoma's house she is astonished by what she finds. The house is small and devoid of luxuries, but there is love and respect. Her cousins Amaka and Obiora are allowed to question authority and choose their own paths. This household offers a marked contrast to what Kambili is used to. Though essentially Catholic, it practices a rather different form of Catholicism in search of a happy, liberal world. In this bewildering environment where there pervades laughter all around Kambili finds the liberty to unlock her heart. Auntie Ifeoma directs Kambili to reconsider her stance on Papa-Nnukwu. When she searches his face, she finds no traces of godliness. After being as per with his innocence ritual Kambili questions the absolute authority of her father as apparent in her trying immensely to protect the portrait of Papa-Nnukwu drawn and gifted by Amaka.

Kambili's faith is not confined to be Catholic or traditionalist either, and she can defy her father while being an obedient daughter at the same time. An individualistic sense is inserted in her at Auntie Ifeoma's household and is strengthened by Father Amadi, an African priest, with whom she acquaints within the same household. Her shifting attitudes towards nature corroborate her stage of transformation. During one of the first times she showers at Nsukka, she finds an earthworm in the tub. Rather than co-existing with it, she removes it to the toilet. When Father Amadi takes her to have her hair plaited, she watches a determined snail repeatedly crawl out of a basket. She identifies with the snail as she has tried to crawl out of Enugu and her fate. Later when she bathes with rainwater, she leaves the worm alone. She acknowledges that God can be found anywhere and she appreciates its determination. At the end, we find Kambili capable of taking decision of her own. A sense of freedom is visible when she envisions her brother getting freed from prison and bursts-

We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we'll go to America to visit Auntie Ifeoma. We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I'll plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers." (PH 306-7).

The titular purple hibiscus is representative of freedom and hope.

Shifting our focus to the gradual sexual awakening of an adolescent girl, we can easily find out that the present debut covers three years time span of the narrator herself. While the novel opens she is a fifteen-year-old girl and at time it ends, she is a bit matured woman of eighteen. In the midst, the more relevant biological maturation is delicately offered to the readers. The narrator, Kambili shares the moment of her period when she is in Abba. As most obvious, her mother takes care and is anxious enough about her pads. Kambili presents her cousin Amaka, equal of her age and finds contrast in their life-style. Amaka is very much like a girl of her age and passes time in front of the mirror to view her image in full, wears lipstick and takes care to maintain her hair. Kambili on the other hand goes to the mirror to check whether all the buttons are right. But while in Auntie Ifeoma's house she gradually wears sorts, tries lipstick on her lips and plaits her hair in parlour. She has a crush

with Father Amadi, a frequent visitor in Aunty Ifeoma's house. At first she tries hard so that Father Amadi should not become a fascination for her but can't cast aside his musical voice-

Father Amadi's musical voice echoed in my ears until I fell asleep. (PH 139)

So much Father Amadi tries to give words to Kambili's pent up feelings, so much she comes closer to him. Her feeling becomes solidified when the hair plaiting woman puts stress on the account that a man brings a woman to parlour when he is in love with that very woman. Kambili begins to rethink herself, about the world around her. Words which often come halting forth to her, begins to sing with her crush and often alone. A praising from him about her fine legs to run makes her play with schoolmates for whom she remained a 'snob' so long. She begins to analyse carefully how he behaves, moves, plays, drinks water et al. Father Amadi's physical gestures- shoulder, bare legs- are within her gaze now. All these do not go beyond Amaka's sight as she proclaims, "You have a crush on him, don't you?" (PH 219)

Father Amadi as evident has another intention to make arrangements so that Kambili and her brother are sent to boarding schools for their better living devoid of oppression of their father but to Kambili the story is different. What Father Amadi opines is correct to her because she is infatuated to him and gets him so close that if she puffs out her belly, it seems to touch his belly. She is in fear of losing the moment and tries to make it everlasting by throwing her hands around him and lace her fingers together behind his neck. She indulges herself in jovial expression with him about sucking the juices of flowers which is very much indicative of her emerging sexuality. She finds reflection of her in his eyes and as she recounts,

THAT NIGHT WHEN I BATHED, with a bucket half full of rainwater, I did not scrub my left hand, the hand that Father Amadi had held gently to slide the flower off my finger. (PH 269)

Kambili goes with Father Amadi to say good-byes to the families on campus because he is decided to move to Germany. She can't but resist herself to make her love proposal, and when gets closer

"[She] wanted [their] lips to meet and hold,..." (PH 276)

After being denied she cannot decide whether to laugh or cry and thinks him to be wrong. The spell of Father Amadi pervades in her. Amaka cuts jokes,

"Obiora says you must be having sex, or something close to sex, with Father Amadi. We have never seen Father Amadi look so bright-eyed." (PH 281)

But to Kambili it matters little,

"I did not want to dwell on how strange it felt discussing whether or not I had had sex with Father Amadi." (PH 281)

Amaka continues joking with Kambili as to get involved in agitating for optional celibacy in the priesthood or seeking permission for fornication to all priests once in a month or so. But those joking seem very much stinging to Kambili at this juncture when her heart is completely wet and her body badly seeks Father Amadi.

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