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Achike Household as a Microcosm of Colonial Bearing- A Study of Eugene as a colonizer in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract:

This discourse examines Eugene as a colonial product who gradually reveals himself to be a colonizer of a different sort- a heedless patriarch swaying his authority everywhere. The novel portrays Eugene as a staunch, religious zealot who wreaks havoc on his family members on account of their inability to live life on his terms and conditions. This is exactly what the British colonizers did in Africa and it left an imprint on the minds of those Africans who were inclined to support the traditional patriarchal society prompting them to extend a system wherein they could behave exactly as their masters had done, thereby, helping themselves regain that lost egoistic self which the colonizers had trampled and destroyed. This paper by way of throwing light on the sectarian mindset of Eugene explores various media through which an aura of colonization is perpetuated in Achike family. It underlines various colonial interests which peep in through those narrow crevices that persist in a colony even after decolonization has taken place. The paper also foregrounds the idea of the non- acceptance of the undue excruciating and agonizing presence of a colonial progenitor i.e. Eugene who is finally eliminated by his own wife, having long suffered and choked under his autocratic hand.

Keywords: Colonizer, colonized, British, Africa, patriarchal, decolonization.

Introduction:

In the postcolonial African situation, Adichie has been attracting wide attention because her works have an intrinsic potential to captivate the readers and provide a clear cut understanding of the issues they deliberate upon. Her oeuvre of fiction is no doubt not so comprehensive but she has won many awards especially for her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* which managed to lay hands on Hurston- Wright Legacy Award 2004 for Best Debut Fiction Category, Commonwealth Writer's Prize 2005 for Best First Book in Africa etc. It was shortlisted for Orange Prize for Fiction 2004, John Llewellyn Rhys Prize 2004/2005 and also long listed for Booker Prize 2004.

“The term ‘post-colonial’ ... cover[s] all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (Bill Ashcroft et.al 2). The novel *Purple Hibiscus*, set in postcolonial Africa, presents itself as an important one which casts a ray of light on the

issue of continuance of the colonial legacy even when the colonizers have left. This has been brought to the fore through the character of Eugene who assumes the role of the colonizer in his own family by implementing on them the colonial traits which he inherited from his own masters as a result of which his family is relegated to the position of the colonized. The agencies which he employs to keep up his patriarchal stance are in no way his own but those which the colonizers had left behind. He makes them work to attain the position of a colonizer himself and embraces the channels like social hierarchy, his staunch social beliefs, religion and education to prevail upon his wife and children in a way that causes mental and physical pain, thereby acquiring the position of a neo-colonizer- an agency through which the British influence continues to dominate the African mindset.

Eugene's Colonial Deportment

According to Albert Memmi, "Colonialism denies human rights to people it has subjugated by violence and whom it keeps in poverty and ignorance by force, therefore, as Marx would say, in a state of subhumanity" (50). This colonial situation prevails in the household of Eugene precluding the economic factor wherein he dominates over all the members and single handedly takes the decisions of the family. Like a tyrant, he compiles the schedules for his children Kambili and Jaja which they have to follow every second. Kambili wondering on the substantiality of these schedules says:

I... looked up, and stared at my daily schedule, pasted on the wall above me. *Kambili* was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as *Jaja* was written on the schedule above Jaja's desk in his room... Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep (Adichie 15).

Likewise, neocolonialism entails the colonizer's continued socio-economic and cultural interference with their former colonies in an indirect way, especially the African colonies which were politically liberated in the aftermath of the Second World War. The term neocolonialism was coined by Kwame Nkrumah, former President of Ghana (1960-1966) and it appeared in the 1963 preamble of the Organization of African Unity Charter.

In *Neo Colonialism-The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah wrote, "In place of Colonialism as the main instrument of Imperialism, we have today neo colonialism... [which] like colonialism is an attempt to export the social conflicts of the capitalist countries" (3, 5). In the novel, this conflicting situation is transported in Achike family and Eugene becomes the via media. This conflict is revealed in the relationship of Eugene with other family members, though some of them like Papa Nkuwu and Aunty Ifeoma are able to resist while as others like Kambili and Beatrice blindly follow his code of conduct. The disparity of beliefs between Eugene and others is clearly reflected in the novel. He doesn't like Igbo to be spoken (or sung) in church.

Kambili and Mama aren't allowed to wear pants, prayers over meals are long-winded and formal and non-Christians aren't even allowed onto Papa's land. These beliefs have led to a deep rift between Papa and his father, Papa-Nnukwu, who still follows traditional Igbo rituals. Papa-Nnukwu attends the festival of mmuo (spirits), offers food to the gods, and performs a morning declaration of innocence. This makes him "Godless heathen" in Papa's eyes, yet Adichie portrays his rituals as equally valid to Catholic ones.

Kambili initially adheres to the social order of her father in such a way that it becomes a part of her own ideology. She in a way internalizes her father's social standards and always wants to be source of pride for him as she believes, like a slave, that her father's ideals are far superior to her own. She says, "I wanted to make Papa proud, to do... well. I needed him to touch the back of my neck and tell me that I was fulfilling God's purpose" (48). However, a conflict arises when she begins to realize the worth of her own ideas, her wishes and her own concept of right and wrong. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* talks about the 'Total liberation' which according to him concerns all sectors of the personality. It requires the enslaved figure of the colonized to refuse the privilege of recognition to the colonial master (Leela 19). This tendency develops in Kambili and it leads to the clash of principles thereby perpetrating a tension in the family in which Eugene openly demonstrates his colonial conduct by harshly beating his wife to the extent of inducing a miscarriage in her when she tries to resist any of his orders. He also beats Kambili, first by kicking her and then using a belt, when she brings her grandfather's painting to her house. She says:

He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop... Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire. The kicking increased in tempo, and... I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery. The stinging was raw now, even more like bites, because the metal landed on open skin on my side, my back, my legs. Kicking. Kicking. Kicking. Perhaps it was a belt now because the metal buckle seemed too heavy. Because I could hear a swoosh in the air... More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet (Adichie 101).

According to Jill, the delineation of this violently authoritative father gives way for a great deal of complexity whereby a strict criticism is hurled on both British colonialism and traditional patriarchal powers for their influences on the oppression of marginalized groups. Regarding colonization, Fanon, in *'Wretched of the Earth'* says, "not very long ago, the earth numbered 2000 million inhabitants, i.e. 500 million human beings and 1500 million natives. The former possessed the world, the rest borrowed it" (136). This was the case when the world was infested with colonization and a few people ruled large populations. In the novel, Adichie tries to reconstruct this situation in the family of Eugene where a single person who considers himself superior to others exercises control on all others.

As far as the culture and religion go, Eugene discards his own traditional system and adheres to the religion of the colonizers which is the Catholic doctrine of Christianity. This implies that the Evangelist reason for which the British came to Africa under the garb of missionaries i.e. the intention of converting Africans to the Christian religion is carried forward by Eugene. He becomes a staunch Catholic to the extent that he doesn't accept any other religion to be of equal footing. He shows faith in the priests who translate to him the rigid religious ideals and persuade him to live his life according to them. He relies on Father Benedict who praises him for using his power for spreading the Gospel and speaking the truth while showing an aversion towards Father Amadi who is comparatively liberal in his lifestyle and not like the so called 'Godly men'. Father Benedict indirectly controls and influences Eugene to help him keep up the Catholic denomination. He being the representative of the superior race is looked with awe and respect which Adichie has beautifully captured in her novel as:

Even though Father Benedict had been at St. Agnes for seven years, people still referred to him as "our new priest." Perhaps they would not have if he had not been white. He still looked new. The colors of his face, the colors of condensed milk and a cut-open soursop, had not tanned at all in the fierce heat of seven Nigerian harmattans. And his British nose was still as pinched and as narrow as it always was (Adichie 6).

The fact that the whites considered themselves superior to blacks didn't even preclude the highly reverent and God fearing class of priests and such a trait is clearly evident in Father Benedict who speaks of Igbo cultural elements with contempt and tries to rectify what he perceives wrong and ungodly in them with his own cultural and religious elements which he finds superior as is revealed from the following:

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. Also, hand clapping was to be kept at a minimum, lest the solemnity of Mass be compromised. But he allowed offertory songs in Igbo; he called them native songs, and when he said "native" his straight-line lips turned down at the corners to form an inverted U (Adichie 6).

According to Fanon, the imposed inferiority of Black religion and culture and even the entire race had far reaching psychiatric and psychopathological consequences whereby Blacks always tried to emulate the Whites. It is the same inferiority complex because of which Eugene develops a colonial attitude and having perceived the colonizer's culture and religion better than his own traditionalist religious system, he subsequently compels his family to adopt the same religious practices with an unusual intensity. Adichie description of the zealous attitude of Eugene during the mass corroborates this:

Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year. His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a

perfect cross with his ash covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of “dust and unto dust you shall return (Adichie 6).

Eugene is so engrossed in his religious ideals that he even breaks all ties with his father for not being a believer of his liking. He forsakes his father’s funeral thinking that it would pollute his own religious faith. He says, “I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral” (92).

In spite of his unacceptable behavior, Eugene expects all the love and respect from his family members which he keeps in a perfect condition to maintain his social respectability just as in the colonies where the naked truth revealed itself; the mother countries preferred it dressed and needed the natives to love them. It was in this situation that the European elite set about fabricating native elite; they selected adolescents, marked on their foreheads with a branding iron, the principles of Western culture, stuffed into their mouths verbal gags and grand turgid words which stuck to their teeth (Fanon 136). Fanon adds that “Another generation [of colonizers]...explain[ed] to us that our values were poorly suited to the reality of their lives”. It shows that they made monsters out of the colonial subjects and their claims of humanism were not universal but racist and their practices clearly set them apart (Fanon 137). Adichie has been successful in incorporating this idea in her novel where Eugene in spite of being a religious person, who is expected to treat his family especially his wife with kindness, actually behaves in an inhuman way inflicting violence and barbarity on them, thereby making an outright difference between him and them. This patriarchal tendency is also revealed by the attitude of Father Benedict who continuously tries to show his dominance over his flock.

Fanon in *Black Skin White Mask* takes key from Manoni’s work which leads him to conclude that there are certain latent forms of psychosis which become overt as a result of traumatic experiences. Adichie uses the character of Eugene to demonstrate such psychosis which takes the shape of aggression after having suffered from a colonial encounter. His psychosis is revealed in his overly aggressive behavior regarding the unfulfilment of his religious creed by his family.

In addition to this, the education that Eugene supports plays a role in reinvigorating a colonial enterprise in his family. He doesn’t allow his children to speak Igbo often and models them in an educational system that suits his standards rather than the one which nourishes their intellect and creativity. Like his own lifestyle he chooses a mechanical way of learning and cramming for Kambili so that she could secure first rank in the class. A slight fall in her position doesn’t invite any encouragement from her father to do better but an infuriating insult which never gives Kambili a chance to ponder on the reason of her decline. This mechanical attitude is a clear reflection of the British process of creating a set of intermediaries who were taught a language, not for their own benefit but for the benefit of the colonizers. Here Eugene wants Kambili to stand first so that his materialistic prestige is aggrandized.

According to Fanon, language is one of the important elements that enable a colored man to develop an understanding of the different dimensions of the other. For him, to speak is to exist for the other. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O also believes that language was an important tool used by the colonizers to exercise their control over African nation. The Europeans snatched the native language from Africans and taught them their own so as to inculcate in them the principles of their own cultural thought. Ngugi, recounting his childhood experiences, says that they were punished and even fined for speaking Gikuyu in the missionary schools (11). This removal of the native language, as inferior to the language of mother country, from the consciousness of African thought induced a kind of distance between the natives and their culture. It is this distance that we see having taken roots in Eugene who tends to drift away from his own language and culture. Eugene's respectability is measured by himself and others in his adherence to Eurocentric values: 'Papa changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict. He was gracious, in the eager-to-please way that he always assumed with the religious, especially with the white religious' (Adichie 26). His material success is seen to go hand in hand with his seemingly devout Catholicism and in this way his corrupt view of the world becomes entangled with an imposed religion and the workings of capitalism.

Fanon says that a time-gap gives the so called inferior a chance to grow and when he meets his former superior, he is greeted with aggression. "This is because in the past, each had a fixed position. Now the inferior thinks he has acquired worth...and the superior is determined to conserve the old hierarchy". This is exactly what we see happening with Eugene when he has to confront his son Jaja about not attending the Palm Sunday. Jaja after having lived under the influence of his liberal minded aunt acquired the audacity to support his own ideals and consider them worthwhile and simultaneously stand against what his rigid father deemed right. "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère"(Adichie). This shows that the colonial influence which Eugene tried to impose on his family under the patriarchal setup subsequently faced a revolt from each and every member of the family till finally he was poisoned by his own wife in lieu of further acknowledging his torment.

Conclusion:

The paper has explained that the process of colonization has a long lasting impact on the ones who suffer it; the trauma that people witness under the foreign rule leaves an imprint on their psychological makeup which gradually results in a kind of inferiority complex. It then compels an individual to make wrong use of force just as he has once witnessed his masters doing, believing it to be the right way of educating and improving the ones under him. It is this psychosis which perpetuates a cycle of violence and leads to a situation in which a relentless influence of foreign agencies continues to dominate the poorly developed nations which were once their colonies. The paper has tried to capture the evils of colonialism as reflected in the Achike family and shown it to be the result of the colonial hangover in Eugene, the head of the

family- who in wake of satisfying his hurt ego builds up and rules over a similar surrounding in which he was rendered a worthless puppet.

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