



**Harmony with Nature: A Study of Nature Symbols in Chimamanda Ngozi
Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

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Abstract

In literature, writers often employ symbols of nature to exhibit their emotion and reflection. The present work examines how African literature gives importance to nature symbols in reference to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is Adichie's debut novel published in 2003. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* explores the life of a wealthy Nigerian family with the protagonist Kambili, a young girl who tries to find her own voice in an oppressive society and home. By using nature related symbols, Adichie makes her novel highly moving and her profound ideas reach the readers easily and convincingly.

Key words: Symbolism, Physical Setting, Nature, Animals, Flowers

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian novelist, essayist, poet, playwright, and short story writer. She also writes under the pseudonym Amanda N. Adichie. Regarded as one of Nigeria's most talented young writers, Adichie is acknowledged for her well – crafted stories and novels that explore the political and personal repercussions of recent Nigerian history. Her debut *Purple Hibiscus* is a story of a young girl (Kambili) who tries to find her own voice and speaks out against her violent oppressive father. The novel is a compelling tale told well by a confident voice with much potential for the future. The child's voice also points to the cyclic nature of the violence.



This paper gives focus to some recurrent nature symbols that appear all through the narrative and play a vital role in Adichie's novel. Nature symbols in her novel, foretells what is going to happen to her protagonist and they are closely connected to the main plot of her stories. In her novel, nature is seen as a living character that leads and controls the action. The novel takes place, move and end in a formidable situation of nature. The novel is abundantly rich with symbols drawn from nature. Throughout her novel Adichie uses symbols from nature to describe various emotional situations. Nature symbols have been employed to examine human relationships and their significance.

Adichie's close connection with nature is illustrated by her portrayal of forests, water and weather phenomena, seasons of the year and fauna and flora of Nigeria. Adichie also emphasises the importance of the natural elements for the culture of the country, as exemplified by the role of its herbs and flowers in certain cultural traditions. One of the main themes of her novel is close interaction between the Igbo people and the natural elements of their country. Adichie attaches certain values to the natural elements of Nigeria. She is of the opinion that their wellbeing on earth is a value in itself, because it ensures the survival of the planet. She imputes human values to the natural elements.

The natural world is certainly the principal source of the descriptions used in her novel. Not only do many important scenes take place in the open air, but even when they are indoors, the characters are likely to be aware of the world outside the walls and windows. Every kind of natural phenomenon is referred to – for example: trees, flowers, animals, rivers and the sun - and also the landscapes into which these features are composed. Throughout her novel Adichie uses a rich network of nature symbols which can help a reader to comprehend the deeper nuances of the novel.

The symbolism of flowers has always been a significant part of cultures around the world due to their functional meaning in daily life. From their decorative to their aromatic role, flowers and their symbolic meaning trigger emotions, convey wishes and represent thoughts that cannot be explicitly expressed. In this regard, an elaborate language based on flower symbolism has been developed in many societies, to convey clear messages to the recipient. However, in some cultural contexts, although the flower symbolism has social connotations, it is mainly associated with economic references. As flowers are an essential precursor to fruits, they are inevitably a source of expectations and hence foster a set of hopes and dreams, which can ultimately lead to excitement or disappointment.

Adichie is so obsessed and attracted by the beauty of flowers that she selects the *Purple Hibiscus* as the title of her debut novel. Hibiscus is found in warm-temperate subtropical and tropical regions and is symbolic to many cultures all over the world. In all settings of the novel—Enugu, Abba town, Nsukka—the presence of



hibiscuses is mentioned. Many people are interested in the hibiscus. It is used for make-up or for decoration. In the Pacific Islands, it is said that women wear the hibiscus symbolically behind their ears. Edie Smith reveals, “Behind the left ear, a hibiscus represents the woman as a desirous lover; behind the right ear, the woman is taken; behind both ears, the woman is taken but prefers another lover” (7).

The red hibiscuses are symbolic of the violence in Kambili's life while the purple hibiscuses symbolize liberty, defiance and the freedom to speak out. The red hibiscuses that are planted in the garden of the family home in Enugu suggest the family's oppression, as it is only through Papa's violence that he keeps them under his control. The 'Startling red hibiscuses' are symbolic of their current pain.

The colour of the hibiscus is usually red, but can be white, pink, yellow, reddish orange or purple. Such colourful flowers formed “a circular burst of bright colors” in the garden in front of Auntie Ifeoma's house in Nsukka as “Roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora and croton grew side by side like a hand painted wreath” (112). It is in this garden that Jaja and Kambili see a purple hibiscus for the first time.

The purple hibiscus is an icon of a sought freedom. The time Jaja and Kambili spent in Nsukka changed their lives indeed. The narrator confesses that they “all changed after Nsukka— even Papa— and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order” (209). They gained the stamina in Nsukka to fight for freedom, which was rare in their daily schedules. The purple hibiscus represents this long-sought freedom. Jaja's defiance is described by Kambili as “fragrant with the undertones of freedom” (16), like her aunt's unusual purple hibiscus. Jaja builds up his courage slowly in the same rhythm as the purple hibiscus he planted takes its time to grow. The purple hibiscus is the personification of Jaja and is used as a symbol for freedom which Jaja won from his father. He got it from Nsukka and has brought it now in Enugu. Kambili wants him to spread it to Abba, “We'll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus” (306-07).

Palms symbolize victory or triumph. In Christianity, palms are associated particularly with Palm Sunday. The first part of the novel is entitled “Palm Sunday” and it describes Father Benedict speaking of Jesus Christ's triumphant entry, inviting his congregation to reflect Christ's triumphant entry into their lives. Jesus is triumphant over sin and death by dying on the wood of a tree and rising again. As a symbol of victory in *Purple Hibiscus*, the palm refers to the victory of Beatrice and her children, Jaja and Kambili, over Eugene, her husband and her children's father.

The palm is also associated with Papa-Nnukwu. Reading the novel from the perspective of the palm as a paradisiacal symbol, one can say that Papa-Nnukwu dies because he is deprived of his palms, being taken out of his traditional milieu or biotope where palms are used for sleeping mats, door or gate mat and for house



roofing. Papa-Nnukwu's bathroom is an "outhouse, a closet-size building of unpainted cement blocks with a mat of entwined palm fronds pulled across the gaping entrance" (63) and his shrine is "a low, open shed, its mud roof and walls covered with dried palm fronds" (66-67). He is also living in a village where women use red palm oil in cooking, where people sit on "benches beneath trees, drinking palm wine from cow horns" (55), and where a man bringing palm wine to a girl's parents is synonymous to asking her hand for marriage. These examples show the place and impact of palms in Papa-Nnukwu's existence. To move him from there is tantamount to killing him.

The Egyptian farmers use the palm tree like a clock or calendar measuring months because it gives a bud regularly every month (Julien 272). In *Purple Hibiscus*, trees become a measure of time, as when Kambili tells the reader that "Aunty Ifeoma came the next day, in the evening, when the orange trees started to cast long, wavy shadows across the water fountain in the front yard" (71) or of her being awakened by "the rustling of the coconut fronds" (58).

The physical setting in *Purple Hibiscus* is symbolic of the clash between African and Western civilizations and the dichotomy between the urban and rural settings. The novel is set in the South Eastern Nigerian towns of Enugu, Nsukka and Abba which are predominately populated by the Igbo.

Enugu, a sprawling metropolis, represents Western civilization as it is the site of industrialization and development as evidenced with its own airport, roads, hotels, recreational centres and factories in comparison to the rural and dusty university town of Nsukka. Abba is the ancestral town of the Achikes which they visit every year during Christmas. Kambili's description of the house in Enugu alludes to a grand palace filled with many tastefully furnished rooms. Yet, the vast space is seen as a form of prison as she describes the compound walls being "topped by coiled electric wires" so high that one could not see cars driving by on their street (9).

For Kambili, Nsukka not only represents a town where her aunt lives but a symbol of liberty. Her teenage development becomes complete in this town because for the very first time her mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes and sings. Through Aunty Ifeoma, Kambili discovers Papa Nnukwu's sense of pantheism, as she watches him from a distance commune with his Gods- an occasion which proves the old man a better believer, who understands the intricate arithmetic of religion, most especially, the relationship between God and man, thereby disproving and debunking her father's stony fundamentalism. For the very first time she lives a life not dictated by schedule, though the items in the schedule are concretely engraved in her hearts. Aunty Ifeoma consigns her nephew and niece's schedules and customizes them to her world – a world characterized by the application of the commonest of senses.



In Auntie Ifeoma's house everybody has the liberty to say anything, provided elders are not insulted. This enthusiasm with which discourses are introduced and sustained is not only mind boggling to Kambili, but also causes consternation in her psyche. Moreover Nsukka is where she is happiest, she becomes aware of military regimes in Nigeria and the strife that people are experiencing. She comes to a close encounter with rioting students and raids from police. But inspite of these experiences, this is where Kambili becomes most spiritual as she witnesses the 'beautiful virgin' in Aokpa. In Nsukka, she leaves with a painting of her grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu. This is a symbol of her emancipation from her father's thumb; she becomes Kambili instead of Eugene's daughter.

The yard in the Enugu family house is depicted as "wide enough to hold a hundred people dancing atilogu, spacious enough for each dancer to do the usual somersaults and land on the next dancer's shoulder" (9). Despite the abundance of space for the children to fully express them, they are confined to their rooms and thus, feel suffocated. The four-story white house with a water fountain in Abba is also large. Kambili describes, "The wide passages made our house feel like a hotel, as did the impersonal smell of doors kept locked most of the year, of unused bathrooms and kitchens and toilets, of uninhabited rooms and two upper-level floors that have not been used for years" (58). The Gothic descriptions of the Achike family houses are symbolic of a stagnation of life which is further enforced by the regimented lifestyle practised by the family members. The children follow a schedule each day to ensure they do not stray. The mechanized direction provided by Eugene Achike is contrasted with Auntie Ifeoma's more liberal approach to raising children.

Red Walls are another important symbol in *Purple Hibiscus*. They portray how controlled Kambili is by her father. Adichie talks about how Kambili's school was chosen because it had high walls. Kambili also describes the high 'compound walls' of her own home. She is heavily suffocated by these walls. The silence of the walls is palpable and heavily feared by Kambili, who says she "felt suffocated. The ...walls...narrowing, bearing down on me" (7). Kambili has immense claustrophobia created by the silence. She is afraid to speak, but she also wants someone else to speak so that Papa doesn't have a chance to have his anger attacks.

Animals have earned great respect and become sacred symbols in African culture. In their relationship with the human world, they have served as predators, prey, food, companions, messengers, and beasts of burdens. They also hold great lessons for those who are willing to observe them and share their energies. As man has grown to view himself above the beasts of the fields, he has also lost touch with his own divine intuition. It is the animal world, however, which lives by its natural instincts, and has not learned to doubt them. By observing animals and working with totem animal spirits, one must listen to the wisdom they offer.



This paper takes up Adichie's usage of nature symbols to connect nature with man. By employing various symbols, readers understand what the author wishes to import. Profound ideas and serious thoughts are mostly narrated with the help of symbols. Her subtle art of employing symbols makes her writing unique and appealing. The readers are able to grasp the mind of the author by understanding the meaning of the symbols. Thus symbols play a dual role of enhancing her style of writing and helping one to understand the central views and ideas of her novel.

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