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## Re-contextualizing Postcolonial Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: A Derridean Perspective

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### Abstract

The article explores the binary oppositions embedded in the maiden novel of Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). It re-interprets the binary opposites from a Derridean perspective by attempting to re-contextualize the Postcolonial identity. *Purple Hibiscus* is a quintessential novel which encapsulates multiple perspectives of the colonizer and colonized and Adichie articulates postcolonial discourse which dismantles the Nigerian identity portrayed by the colonizer. Adichie in her TED talk "The Danger of a Single Story" states how a single story (narrative) can silence multiple perspectives by creating stereotypes. The present study seeks to analyse the binary oppositions that underlie the dominant ways of thinking in postcolonial Nigeria. Derrida's deconstructive strategy is adopted to exemplify the dichotomies. Derrida opines that human society and culture can only be understood through close analysis of language and its influence on human thought and society. Derridean view of systematic power encoded in language creates a hierarchical binary. This dominant force of power dynamics leads to the strategic resistance in postcolonial discourse. Eventually, the strategic resistance proclaims the identity of the oppressed in postcolonial context. The present study attempts to foreground the operations of binary oppositions such as tradition & modernity, silence & speech (voice), colonized & colonizer and power/resistance in *Purple Hibiscus* there by navigating the postcolonial identity.

**Keywords:** Binary Oppositions, Derridean view, Discourse, Deconstruction, Postcolonial identity

### 1. Introduction:

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's maiden novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is a counter hegemonic discourse on establishing the identity of postcolonial Nigeria and deciphering the colonial ideologies. Adichie sets the novel against the canvas of domestic violence and a military coup in Nigeria. The novel documents the impact of colonialism in Nigeria. Adichie shows how the Africans navigate their identity after colonialism and she also employs binaries in the novel to articulate Africans' search for modern identity. It is a coming of age novel which encapsulates the descriptions of psychical as well as physical (domestic) environments through the eyes of a young narrator. Postcolonial Nigeria struggles with the challenges of corruption and colonial influence. Adichie critiques how colonial ideologies challenge the personal and political spheres in Nigeria. In her TED talk, "The Danger of a Single Story", Adichie challenges the stereotypes of single story and this perception aligns with Derrida's deconstruction that critiques the binary oppositions. The hidden meanings and contradictions embedded in a text are uncovered by dismantling the dichotomies. The novel is explored using Derrida's perspective and deconstructs the binaries. Adichie reiterates the significance of multiple perspectives in dismantling the essentialization of Nigerian people. Adichie engages in articulating a postcolonial discourse which acts as harbinger in exposing the menace of single story (single narrative). Thus the present study dismantles the binary oppositions in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* using Derrida's deconstruction method. "Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction'. It is in fact much closer the original meaning of the word 'analysis'...The deconstruction of a text does not proceed by random doubt or arbitrary subversion, but by the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text" (Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, p.5).

### 2. Objective:

The study analyzes *Purple Hibiscus* by employing Derridean perspective and it focuses on challenging the binary oppositions and exploring the postcolonial identity. A text is seen as something that carries a plurality of significance and it is contradictory to single stable meaning. The deconstructionist dismantles the binary oppositions in the text to show the disunity which upholds the unity of the text. The binary oppositions in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* such as tradition/modernity, silence/voice, colonizer/colonized and authority/rebellion are deconstructed to indicate postcolonial identity negotiates between tradition and colonial legacy. This article aims to emphasize that the colonized people embrace hybrid identity, which eventually challenges the notion of fixed identity and offer a Derridean structure of understanding postcolonial discourse.

### 3. Scope and Methodology:

The study attempts to navigate the postcolonial identity in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* using Jacques Derrida's deconstruction method. The word 'deconstruction' does not refer to a

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single or fixed meaning. “Deconstruction is very interested in the ways in which identity is never simply complete or given, but is the product of these kinds of decisions and assumptions” says Alex Thomson (2006). The hybrid trait of the characters is uncovered to re- contextualize identity in a postcolonial society. Themes such as power dynamics, religious tension, resistance, cultural hybridity, liberation and gender are explored. The focus extends to analysis of the symbol purple hibiscus. The scope of the study is limited to Derridean perspective and it does not include any other frameworks. Besides, the present study analyses only *Purple Hibiscus*.

#### **4. Literature review**

Many researchers highlighted the effects of colonialism particularly Eugene’s rejection of Igbo tradition and cultural hybridity in the novel. Janet Ndula (2017) explores the binary oppositions of gender and the disruption of fixed power structures in *Purple Hibiscus*. Scholar Jane Duran (2017) argues the force of West African woman in *Purple Hibiscus* and shows how Adichie is aware of the matrilineality of the West African Tradition. Shauna Ferguson Martin (2015) maps the postcolonial identity in Adichie’s novels and deconstruction is evident her works which produces an infinity of meanings. Scholars have asserted that Adichie’s women characters navigate identity through resistance, silence and resilience particularly Kambili and Aunt Ifeoma. Many feminist critics argue that the novel throws light on the intersection of gender and postcolonial identity. Musa W Dube (2019) investigates the intersection of class, gender, race and violence in the novel and the use of intertextuality.

#### **5. Result and Discussion:**

The novel *Purple Hibiscus* is set in postcolonial Nigeria, a colonized nation torn by the influence of colonial ideologies. Adichie has mastered the use of ambitious and paradoxical language to accommodate the dichotomies which creates a discourse of identity in a postcolonial setting. Adichie cautiously infuses ideology with art to show the issues in contemporary Nigerian society. The deconstructive approach to the novel places the characters in hierarchical classes. Kambili’s father Eugene Achike, a ruthless patriarch and a religious fanatic represents modernity/Christianity. Eugene has been greatly influenced by colonial ideologies, “Papa’s sister, Aunt Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product” (5). He disinherits his own father for being a traditionalist who follows rigidly Igbo practices and stops visiting him. As a colonial product, he never allows his children to speak in Igbo rather he prefers English over Igbo. English is interpreted as the language of civilized people. Though Eugene is a colonized subject, he practices being a colonizer by imposing orders in his family as well as community. Eugene is indeed glorified as a savior by his community for his charity. Eugene’s father embraces indigenous traditions and Igbo culture. Eugene calls his father ‘a heathen’ and never allows his children to visit him. Eugene as a religious fanatic becomes intolerable when his children visit their grandfather. He exercises violence over his children. Papa – Nnukwu’s Igbo practices are influenced by modernity. Aunt Ifeoma, a resilient woman, has been influenced by modernity yet embraces Igbo practices. The

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binary blurs and the traditional practices are subtly influenced by modernity. In addition, it plays a crucial role in shaping the family dynamics.

Kambili, the narrator, is portrayed as intelligent and an exemplary daughter who loves her papa. She is quiet around her father Eugene and this silence is not a way of oppression rather a survival tool or a form of resistance. Eugene is proud of raising quiet children, “the loud children people are raising these days with no home training and no fear of God” (66). Kambili falls victim to the silence that is ubiquitous the novel, “the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta...the silence of reflection time,..the silence of evening rosary...the silence of driving to the church...Even our family time on Sundays was quiet” (31). But Kambili’s brother Jaja’s silence is translated into defiance which leads to the rupture of silence. Eugene silences his wife, father, and his children. He fails to silence his sister Ifeoma. Ifeoma creates a space to critique Eugene’s authority over his family. Eugene’s voice signifies violence in the novel. His violence subjects his wife and children to corporeal punishments. Janet Ndula comments that even when Kambili speaks, her speech is tainted by great fear and her subjugation results in loss of words. The characterization of Aunt Ifeoma suggests her non conformation to the virtuous silence of her Igbo tradition. She is portrayed as fearless and loud who embodies freedom. She is assertive and independent. Besides she displays determination in bringing up her children and in career advancement. She defends her father against Eugene’s condemnation of calling their father as ‘heathen’. She says, “Papa-Nnukwu was not a heathen but a traditionalist, that sometimes what was different was just as good as what was familiar, that when Papa Nnukwu did his itunzu, his declaration of innocence, in the morning, it was the same as our saying the rosary.” (173). But Eugene, a staunch and ruthless colonial fanatic, refuses to join his father’s funeral,” I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral” (189). At the end of the novel, Kambili has started feeling that her father Eugene loses control over the family. His voice is not as authoritative as in the past. “Even the silence that descended on the house was sudden. As though the old silence had broken and left us with the sharp pieces. There was something hanging over all of us” (257-258). This proves that binary silence and voice are dependent.

Eugene, an embodiment of colonized subject, is subjected to the influence of colonial ideologies. He has internalized the values of colonizer and defies his tradition. “The white missionaries brought us their god...which was the same colour as them, worshipped in their language and packaged in the boxes they made” (267). His father Papa – Nnukwu regrets to have allowed his son to internalize the values of colonizer; “My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries” (83). The missionaries in Africa imbibe their language, religion and culture among the colonized. Eugene falls victim to the colonial ideologies however Ifeoma and Papa Nnukwu resist the colonial influence. “I remember the first one that came to Abba, the one they called Fada John. His face was red like palm oil; they say our type of sun does not shine in the white man’s land. He had a helper...they gathered children under

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the ukwa tree in the mission and taught them their religion” (84). Eugene’s dismissal of his Igbo tradition is indeed his search for identity in a postcolonial setting. Ifeoma resists colonial influence yet she embraces modernity. The binary colonized /colonizer blurs into each other and it asserts that identity is a hybrid construct in postcolonial society.

The binary power and resistance co-exist in the novel. Eugene’s ruthless authority is constantly being questioned and resisted by Ifeoma. His power leads to Jaja’s rebellion and Ifeoma’s inquiry. But Kamibili resists this power by being a submissive daughter and she even adores her father despite of his exercise of violence: “Every time Aunt Ifeoma spoke to Papa, my heart stopped, then started again in a hurry. It was the flippant tone; she did not seem to recognize that it was papa, that he was different, special. I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut...” (77). She strongly believes that it is incredible to rebel against her father. “I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He seemed immortal” (287). The rebellion springs from the power structure and it is eventually born out of conflicts. Thus Jaja rebels against his father and he takes responsibility for Eugene’s death. The seeds of freedom are sown in Kambili and Jaja when they visit their Aunt Ifeoma’s home. They breathe in freedom for the first time in Ifeoma’s place. The purple hibiscus, a hybrid flower grown in Ifeoma’s garden symbolizes freedom; it contrasts with Kambili’s home where everything is under the control of Eugene. Kambili wishes to plant freedom in her home after Eugene’s death: “We will plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus too...I am laughing...The new rains will come down son” (307). The seeds of rebellion are sown in the power structures which overthrow authority. The dichotomy of Authority and rebellion are interconnected. Eventually it leads to the quest for freedom and identity. Spivak employs deconstruction to postcolonial issues that has resulted in her advocacy of different modes of negotiation exist within a text. To highlight, Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* is a counter hegemonic discourse and the dominant ideology that creeps in postcolonial society is evident through the portrayal of Eugene. Spivak opines, “the self or subject must be understood not as innate or given, but as constructed discursively and therefore as inevitably decentred” (Spivak,85). Derrida’s conception of subject critiques the traditional approaches to understand and define ‘identity’.

### **6. Findings:**

Deconstruction troubles our notions of definition because of its intense concern with singularity. Adichie aligns with this notion and challenges the dangers of single or fixed meaning and narratives. The binary oppositions are products of social constructs and they are instable. This study has revealed that postcolonial identity in *Purple Hibiscus* is a hybrid construct and it perpetually negotiates between the contradictions. The binary thinking of colonial legacy is critiqued by Adichie and she articulates a new discourse of identity in her writings. The identity of the characters in the novel is subjected to reinterpretation.

**7. Limitations and Research gap:**

The current study focuses on the text through Derridean lens exploring the binary oppositions only. It solely emphasizes the influence of binaries in family dynamics offering a different approach to postcolonial identity. It may not address a comprehensive study of socio cultural and political intricacies of postcolonial Nigeria due to the restricted theoretical perspective. Limited research has studied how the binaries are instable and its role in framing identity. Thus the study examines the trait of binaries in navigating identity.

**8. Conclusion:**

A Derridean approach to the novel *Purple Hibiscus* offers insights into the re-contextualization of postcolonial identity. The dismantling of binaries such as tradition & modernity, silence & speech, power & resistance, and colonized & colonizer reveals the fluidity of identity in the novel. This reflects the instability of existence and identity in postcolonial society. The study also highlights the fluidity of binary oppositions and offers a fresh perspective to embrace the complexity of postcolonial identity. *Purple Hibiscus*, a counter hegemonic discourse, advocates the possibility of multiple narratives and the dangers of a single narrative. Thus, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a riposte to hegemonic discourse which stereotypes identity.

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