

Power Relations in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*; A Foucauldian Reading

G. Keerthana¹, Dr. M. Jayachandran²

¹M.A., M. Phil., SET., NET., Ph.D., Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Srimad Andavan Arts and Science College(Autonomous), Trichy, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy

²M.A., M. Phil., Ph. D, Research Guide & Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Srimad Andavan Arts and Science College(Autonomous), Trichy, Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Trichy

Abstract - This article attempts to explore the power relations in Adichie's maiden novel Purple Hibiscus from a Foucauldian perspective. The term power has been conceptualized by Foucault in two different spheres, coercive and productive. Power operates in a structure where it can control the subjects inside the structure in a coercive way or it can be productive across the structure. The concept of power by Foucault is applied in the selected novel to study the coercive and productive aspects of power in a postcolonial society. Adichie emphasizes how colonial ideologies lead the colonized to mimic the colonizers and how power controls the subalterns in a colonized country.

Index Terms - Colonialism; Power; Postcolonialism; Social structures; Subaltern.

INTRODUCTION

Post colonialism refers to the writing and culture of people who were once colonized by Europeans. It rejects the universalism that is established by Western literature. It aims at unveiling the colonial ideologies in grand narratives by the Europeans. Postcolonial literature addresses the horrors of colonialism at the socio, political and cultural level in the colonized countries. It emerges as a reaction and response to the portrayal of colonized people by the colonizers who stereotype the colonized people as others. The concept of power came from French historian and Philosopher, Michel Foucault. He conceptualizes that we are created through discourse (which is indeed knowledge) and we are our experiences. For instance a child's knowledge depends upon the people in his/her family. So only those family members create

the child's identity. Thus, discourse connects power and knowledge in a hierarchal structure. The leader's power over the members of the team in other words sub ordinates is amplified by their obedience to his order. He terms power in the light of complex set of relations. It is a system of relations in which the actions of the subjects are influenced.

THE OTHER

The same concept of power has been adopted by Postcolonial critics. Edward Said describes the marginalized sections of the world in his book *Orientalism* (1978). Said critiques the perception and representation of 'orients' with the Western ideologies that leads to prejudice. He also comments on the portrayal of the Orientals as others by the West. Gayatri C. Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* terms the oppressed people as the subalterns. She says that the subaltern cannot speak because the power structure of colonialism does not allow its subjects to speak. In addition, the colonized women are oppressed by both power structures of the society the colonizer and the patriarch.

EXERCISE OF POWER IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, (an Igbo writer) maiden novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) stands as a testimony to the tribulations of colonialism exercised over Nigeria and its tradition. The story is set in Eastern part of Nigeria and Adichie has woven the novel with Igbo culture, language and Catholic touch.

The opening lines of the novel signal the clash of cultures and the condition postcolonial countries. The narrator, Kambili, a fifteen-year-old girl, lives in the maze of patriarchal society. Her father Eugene Achike is an archetype of colonial product and a tyrannical catholic patriarch. He abuses his family physically as well as emotionally in order to exercise his power over his subalterns, his wife and his children Kambili and Jaja.

Eugene creates the power structure in the family. He uses his power to teach catholic ideas and he is highly praised and revered by his community, "Papa's title was *omelora*, after all, The One Who Does for the Community" (56). He is a pious Christian and a monstrous abuser of family. He brutally tortures his wife, children and alienates himself from his own father for being an Igbo. His sister Ifeoma is in stark contrast of Eugene. Eugene calls his father a pagan and never allows his children to create a bond with their grandfather. He teaches Western ideology to his children by using his power and they start believing that being an Igbo is uncultured. They have started realizing that Eugene influences them with his colonial ideologies when Aunt Ifeoma said that their grandfather was a traditionalist. "Your papa Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist"(2).

When Kambili and Jaja move from Abba to Nsukka, the university town where Aunt Ifeoma works as a professor, they start breathing the air of freedom for the first time. Aunt Ifeoma's home is filled with joy, peace and love where as Eugene's home is full of wealth, fear and colonial influence. Ifeoma is the symbol of matriarch and the only character who defies Eugene's orders and principles. Kambili and Jaja have started realizing that they can resist the power of Eugene. They realize that they are being treated as subalterns whose voices are silenced by the master, his father. Eugene exercises violence over his family and both Kambili and Jaja feel suffocated at the hands of their father; "I felt suffocated" (6).

TWO ASPECTS OF POWER (COERCIVE AND PRODUCTIVE)

Violence is used to evoke fear among the subalterns and make them obey the leader's rules in order to sustain their power structures. Eugene coerces his subjects and echoes the colonial master who loves everything to be in order. "He did not like us to speak

it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa's sister, Aunt Ifeoma, said once that Papa was too much of a colonial product"(13). He silences everyone around him; "Our steps on the stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays...the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture passage or a book by one of the early church fathers to read and meditate on; the silence of evening rosary; the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterward. Even our family time on Sundays was quiet, without chess games or newspaper discussions, more in tune with the Day of rest"(31). Eugene controls the environment and the behavior of other entities around him using his power.

Foucault distinguishes that power is not a coercive concept that forces us to do things against our wishes, but it can also be an essential, productive and positive force in society. This is evident in the portrayal of Aunt Ifeoma's character. She uses her power in a greatly productive way to protect her family and nurture her children. She stands in stark contrast with her brother Eugene who uses power in coercive approach. The purple hibiscus flowers in Ifeoma's home symbolize the freedom of power that exists in her home, "Aunt 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"(16). The purple hibiscus is a metaphor for Jaja's defiance to Eugene's power and for freedom.

Eugene disowns his father and distances his family from him for worshipping idols. Worshipping idols is the custom being practiced in Igbo culture. Eugene never thinks himself as an Igbo but takes pride in Western things. He despises his own Igbo culture and practices. Eugene's father regrets for allowing his son to the missionaries which eventually turns Eugene into a tyrant catholic son, "Nekenem look at me, 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). When Eugene's power has failed to coerce his father, he throws him out of the structure. He never allows his children to visit their grandfather since he worships idols. "I don't like to send you to the home of a heathen, but God will protect you" (62).

Eugene is the ultimate source where oppression springs from. His staunch believe in Catholicism

silences his family. He becomes the centre of the family as well as community. His corporal punishments cause his wife's miscarriages twice. He has poured boiling water on the children's feet when they visit their traditionalist grandfather whom Eugene scorns as 'heathen'. Kambili is kicked for possessing her grandfather's picture. He uses extreme forms of violence to make everything in order. But he is generous towards his community and donates his wealth for good causes. Adichie's characterization of Eugene is like a yin yang which has both good and evil, man's inherent nature.

Kambili is completely shattered at the murder of Eugene. Her love for her father has failed to find a space to express since he is a patriarch who does not allow the subalterns to speak. She even thinks that her father could not be killed. "I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from all other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal (287)". When Eugene, the immortal in Kambili's eyes, is killed by her mother, Jaja declares himself committing patricide. Eugene's murder can be seen as a form of resistance that arises out of the ruptures of power, "where there is power there is resistance" (Foucault,17).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Purple Hibiscus* encapsulates coercive and productive aspects of power which operates the family as well as society. Power paves way for the birth of resistance as evident in Beatrice's murder of her tyrant husband Eugene and Jaja's rebellious deeds against Eugene. Kambili is subjected to oppression where as Aunt Ifeoma, Jaja and Beatrice play a role at the micro level of power relations (family). Thus power is a system of relations branches out across the society.

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