

The Symbolic Use of Palm, Figurines and Hibiscus in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses many symbols in her novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. An explanation of these symbols will lead readers to a deeper understanding of the message of the author. This paper focuses mainly on the symbols of palm, figurines and hibiscus which are used in *Purple Hibiscus*. It argues that these symbols represent some characters in the novel or at least are used in connection to them through the use of the literary form of pathetic fallacy.

Keywords Adichie, Nigerian Literature, *Purple Hibiscus*, Symbol, Palm, Figurines, Hibiscus, Pathetic Fallacy

1. Introduction

The Nigerian born Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) has written many novels, namely *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) which won the Orange Prize for Fiction and *Americanah* (2013), and a short story collection, *The Thing around Your Neck* (2009). In all these works, she expresses her ideas through the use of African and worldwide symbols.

In her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, especially, concern for symbols of nature holds pride of place. In fact, from beginning to end, descriptions of nature, especially of varieties of flowers and trees, abound. The titles of chapters for example bear a plant's name, besides the obvious Christian Biblical reference—Palm Sunday, before Palm Sunday and after Palm Sunday. The preoccupation with palms cannot go unnoticed in these titles. In addition, Kambili, the narrator, frequently draws the reader's attention to the presence of trees—pine trees, cashew trees, gmelina trees, coconut trees, orange trees, mango trees, frangipani trees, palm trees—surrounding the places where people live. For instance, in the first chapter, coming back to her room to change her clothes after attending Palm Sunday Mass, Kambili describes her bedroom and their whole compound as bordered by flowers and trees as well as the interaction of these with human beings:

"I sat at my bedroom window and changed; the cashew

tree was so close I could reach out and pluck a leaf if it were for the silver-colored crisscross of mosquito netting. The bell-shaped yellow fruits hung hazily, drawing buzzing bees that bumped against my window's netting [...]. It was early rainy season, and the frangipani trees planted next to the walls already filled the yard with the sickly-sweet scent of their flowers. A row of purple bougainvillea, cut smooth and straight as a buffet table, separated the gnarled trees from the driveway. Closer to the house, vibrant bushes of hibiscus reached out and touched one another as if they were exchanging their petals. The purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds but most of the flowers were still on the red ones. They seem to bloom so fast, those red hibiscuses, considering how often Mama cut them to decorate the church altar and how often visitors plucked them as they walked past to their parked cars" [1, p8-9].

People are thus constantly in contact with the green environment of trees, using their shade, flowers, leaves, oil or fruits whenever they want. Sometimes, it is as if the trees are not happy being outside and do their best to make their presence felt indoors. For instance, the narrator observes that it is "as if the high walls locked in the scent of the ripening cashews and mangoes and avocados," [1, p252] because any time the door is opened, the scent of fruits fills the rooms.

Trees also 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" [1, p71] or of her being awakened by "the rustling of the coconut fronds" [1, p58]. Actually, the Egyptian farmers used the palm tree like a clock or calendar measuring months because it gives a bud regularly every month [2]. In the novel people constantly interact with the environment they live in.

It appears then that nature and characters are interconnected in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to such a point that one can argue for the use of the narrative device of "pathetic fallacy" in this novel in the sense of "the ascription of human traits to inanimate nature" [3]. Characters' emotions are carried out by natural elements. Besides, the name 'hibiscus' in the title of the novel points to its importance for the author. What do the "hibiscus" and other plants symbolize? This paper aims at arguing that Adichie

uses palms, hibiscuses, and figurines as ambivalent symbols whose meanings can give insights into understanding hidden aspects of the novel.

2. Palm Symbolism in *Purple Hibiscus*

Palms symbolize victory or triumph. It is in this sense that in ancient Roman culture, a lawyer who wins his case in the forum would decorate his front door with palm leaves [4, p205-206]. Tree branches are actually used in a similar way in Adichie's novel after the coup: "The first week after the coup, Kevin plucked green tree branches every morning and stuck them to the car, lodged above the number plate, so that the demonstrators at Government Square would let us drive past. The green branches meant Solidarity" [1, p27].

Let us observe that there is no precision as to the identity of the tree branches, since it can be a palm tree or any other tree. What is of importance is that they be green tree branches. By carrying tree branches, Kevin and the people in his car join the military people who took power and show their solidarity, celebrating their victory over the government they have overthrown. They use tree branches in this way like toga palmata, which is a toga ornamented with a palm motif, worn to celebrate a military triumph [4, p61].

In Christianity, palms are associated particularly with Palm Sunday. The first part of the novel is entitled "Palm Sunday" and 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. Eugene used to beat them over their observance of Church laws. Mama (Beatrice) is the one named in connection with the palms in the opening of the novel:

"Mama placed the fresh palm fronds, which were wet with holy water, on the dining table and then went upstairs to change. Later, she would knot the palm fronds into sagging cross shapes and hang them on the wall beside our gold-framed family photo. They would stay there until next Ash Wednesday, when we would take the fronds to church, to have them burn for ash. Papa, wearing a long, gray robe like the rest of the oblates, helped distribute ash every year" [1, p3].

Mama holding the palms and Papa the ashes foreshadows the end of the narrative where Papa becomes ashes by being poisoned by Mama who thus gains victory over him, victory hinted at by her handling of the palm fronds. Thus, the person who helps distribute ash becomes ashes and Mama contributes to making him become ash by waiting until next Ash Wednesday to offer the palms back to the church; in other words, she waits for the appropriate time to turn Papa into ashes by killing him. The children, Jaja and Kambili, share in this victory by being one with Mama. This unity is

expressed in the fact that Jaja willingly accepts to go to prison in lieu of Mama.

Tree branches, either palm trees or any other tree, also evoke punishment in Jaja's and Kambili's eyes. Recalling an early childhood experience, as her father was about to punish her, asking her to climb into the tub, Kambili says:

"Why was he asking me to climb into the tub? I looked around the bathroom floor; there was no stick anywhere. Maybe he would keep me in the bathroom and then go downstairs, out through the kitchen, to break a stick off one of the trees in the backyard. When Jaja and I were younger, from elementary two until about elementary five, he asked us to get the stick ourselves. We always chose whistling pine because the branches were malleable, not as painful as the stiffer branches from the gmelina or the avocado" [1, p192].

The tree becomes here an object of scourging, chastising the flesh so that the spirit may triumph over it. It is like the cross Jesus used to redeem sinners without being a sinner himself. It is the cup that must be drunk to win against sin. In the story, Jesus dies on the wooden cross and the Blessed Virgin appears in Aokpe, the place of pilgrimage, on a tree: "See, there on the tree, that's Our Lady" [1, p274]. Eugene can be seen in this way as a martyr whose death leads the guilty to undergo a period of repentance in prison or in life. Mama and Jaja suffer because of what Mama did. All this happens after Palm Sunday. The head of the family dies and his body, the other members of the family, suffers. The victorious become the losers. They do not savor their victory to the end. Jaja suffers in prison and Mama is troubled by what she did. They all regret the deed somehow.

The regret turns then the victory into its opposite. Papa becomes, after the fact, a victorious martyr. It is a victory of good against evil. It is in this way that early Christians used the palm branch to symbolize the victory of the faithful over enemies of the soul, representing the victory of spirit over flesh, and it was widely believed that a picture of a palm on a tomb meant that a martyr was buried there [5]. The palm branch is thus an ambivalent symbol offering different ways of reading the novel.

The palm is also associated with Papa-Nnukwu. It symbolizes his world or his paradise, because, as it is said, it is appropriate to speak of a "tropical paradise of a small island or a stretch of white sand beach with overhanging coconut palms, [...] since palms reach their greatest proliferation in the tropics and are widely distributed in warmer zones of the world" [6]. The palm is then is a symbol of a tropical island paradise. Papa-Nnukwu is linked to his palms, as the narrator notes:

"We all sat and had breakfast with Papa-Nnukwu, listening to him talk about the men who tapped palm wine in the village, how they left at dawn to climb up the palm trees because the trees gave sour wine after the sun rose. I could tell that he missed the village, that he missed seeing those palm trees the men climbed, with a raffia belt encircling them and the tree trunk" [1, p162].

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 were used for sleeping mats, door or gate mat and for house roofing. Papa-Nnukwu's bathroom was an "outhouse, a closet-size building of unpainted cement blocks with a mat of entwined palm fronds pulled across the gaping entrance" [1, p63] and his "shrine was a low, open shed, its mud roof and walls covered with dried palm fronds" [1, p66-67]. 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" [1, p55], and where a man bringing palm wine to a girl's parents is synonymous to asking her hand for marriage [1, p91-92]. These examples show the place and impact of palms in Papa-Nnukwu's existence. To move him from there is tantamount to killing him. In dying, however, he goes back to this paradise, going to join his ancestors.

The narrative moves from "Speaking with our spirits/Before Palm Sunday," to "Breaking Gods/Palm Sunday," then to "The pieces of God/After Palm Sunday" and end in "A different silence/The Present." This is the logical succession of events, but the author started with the climax before explaining and ending it. Logically, the narrative moves from 'speaking' to 'silence' as the action of breaking the Gods leads to having pieces of Gods. The breaking of the figurines is symbolic in this sense because once they are broken, things fall apart.

3. Symbolism of Figurines in *Purple Hibiscus*

The breaking of the figurines happens on Palm Sunday. The novel opens with this sad news, repeated many times throughout the narrative, of things starting to "fall apart at home when [the narrator's] brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étagère*" [1, p3]. Three main characters are named here: Jaja, Papa and the third one who is symbolically personified by the figurines. The missal is Papa's as the pronoun 'his' shows it; but not so with the figurines, if not the same personal pronoun would have been used. The definite article is used instead. The figurines belong to somebody else.

The figurines are always associated with Mama or at least mentioned in connection with her. For example, commenting on the incident, the narrator says that the missal "missed Jaja completely, but it hit the glass *étagère*, which Mama polished often" [1, p7]. It was a hobby she had been doing in the period preceding the incident, that is, before Palm Sunday, so much so that her daughter had noticed the attention she paid to the figurines:

"Mama stood hugging herself in the center of the living room, near the glass table, until Sisi brought a plastic bowl of water and a kitchen towel. The *étagère* had three shelves of delicate glass, and each one held beige ballet-dancing

figurines. Mama started at the lowest layer, polishing both the shelf and the figurines. I sat down on the leather sofa closest to her, close enough to reach out and straighten her wrapper" [1, p35].

Mama is so happy with the figurines that she hugs herself. The glass is delicate, easily breakable. It is a sign of fragility in comparison to something stronger like the heavy missal which may personify Papa himself. The author establishes a link between the figurines and Mama's gentle attempts to cope with her husband's violence. Mama is physically weaker than Papa. Interestingly, each time she is beaten by her husband, after her miscarriages for example, she spends some time with the figurines as if retracting to think over and find solution to stop such abuses.

Following the incident on Palm Sunday, willing to show her sympathy to her mother, Kambili reveals how dear the figurines are to her:

"I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama.'" She nodded quickly, then shook her head to show that the figurines did not matter. They did, though. Years ago, before I understood, I used to wonder why she polished them each time... I would go down to see her standing by the *étagère* with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurine. The last time, only two weeks ago, when her swollen eye was still the black-purple color of an overripe avocado, she had rearranged them after she polished them" [1, p10-11].

The narrator notices her mother's attachment to the figurines. She goes on asking her whether she would replace the broken figurines or not. From the negative answer Kambili gets from her mother, she comes to the realization that "Maybe Mama had realized that she would not need the figurines anymore; that when Papa threw the missal at Jaja, it was not just the figurines that came tumbling down, it was everything. I was only now realizing it, only just letting myself think it" [1, p15]. This "everything" is nothing but Mama. The figurines represent Mama, so the destruction of the figurines means an attempt at Mama. The missal missed Jaja but hit Mama in some way. She is hurt. The damage the missal does to the figurines shows to what extent Mama is hurt by this violent action from her husband. It is not his first time hitting her. He beat her and his children many times. This instance, however, becomes the turning point because Mama is going to make sure she would not be beaten again in the future.

In fact, since the smashing of the figurines, the relationships in the family have changed. Mama secretly gets ready for vengeance. Her retaliation will bring consequences to the whole family. Kambili notices the change and does not know what action to undertake:

"There was something hanging over all of us. Sometimes I wanted it all to be a dream—the missal flung at the *étagère*, the shattered figurines, the brittle air. It was too new, too foreign, and I did not know what to be or how to be" [1,

p257].

The “everything” mentioned earlier above is about to do “something” that is deemed to be “too new, too foreign” in family life—to poison Papa and thus get rid of him. Things are going to change. There is no need to replace the figurines but to make sure that no missal will ever be thrown at anything or anybody else.

The figurines personify Mama. She is changing. Reflecting on the possible reason for this change, Kambili, letting her “mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and [she] spoke more with [their] spirits than with [their] lips” [1, p15-16], says that Nsukka and especially the hibiscus in Auntie Ifeoma’s little garden play a role in this change. Therefore, an investigation into the symbolism of the hibiscus, just like the palm we have seen earlier, can provide insights into understanding how it all started and why Adichie named her novel after this delicate flower.

4. Symbolism of Hibiscus in *Purple Hibiscus*

Hibiscus, like palm tree, 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, though not the purple one. For example, Kambili tells at the beginning of the novel about their house in Enugu:

“Vibrant bushes of hibiscus reached out and touched one another as if they were exchanging their petals. The purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds, but most of the flowers were still on the red ones. They seemed to bloom so fast, those red hibiscuses, considering how often Mama cut them to decorate the church altar and how often visitors plucked them as they walked past to their parked cars. It was mostly Mama’s prayer group members who plucked flowers; a woman tucked one behind her ear once—I saw her clearly from my window. But even the government agents, two men in black jackets who came some time ago, yanked at the hibiscus as they left” [1, p9].

Many people are thus 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. “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 color of the hibiscus is usually red, but can be white, pink, yellow, reddish orange or purple. Such colorful 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” [1, p112]. It is in this garden that Jaja and Kambili saw a purple hibiscus for the first time:

“‘That’s a hibiscus, isn’t it, Auntie?’ Jaja asked, staring at a

plant close to the barbed wire fencing. ‘I didn’t know there were purple hibiscuses.’ Auntie Ifeoma laughed and touched the flower, colored a deep shade of purple that was almost blue. ‘Everybody has that reaction the first time. My good friend Phillipa is a lecturer in botany. She did a lot of experimental work while she was here. Look, here’s white ixora, but it doesn’t bloom as fully as the red.’ Jaja joined Auntie Ifeoma, while we stood watching them. ‘O maka, so beautiful,’ Jaja said. He was running a finger over a flower petal. Auntie Ifeoma’s laughter lengthened to a few more syllables. ‘Yes, it is. I had to fence my garden because the neighborhood children came in and plucked many of the more unusual flowers. Now I only let in the altar girls from our church or the Protestant church’ ” [1, p128-129].

Already, we see Jaja showing interest in the purple hibiscus developed by Phillipa. It is one of the unusual flowers. It generally “means ‘delicate beauty,’ relating to the sunny and delicate conditions under which it will bloom and to the fragility and beauty of its flower” [7]. Part of the delicate conditions, as Auntie Ifeoma explains, is that “Hibiscuses [do] not like too much water, but they [do] not like to be too dry, either” [1, p197]. They are to be handled with caution, like Mama’s figurines on the delicate glass *étagère*.

Jaja likes the purple hibiscus so much that he wraps stalks of purple hibiscus in black cellophane paper for their gardener in Enugu [1, p197]. When he had a chance to talk to Auntie Ifeoma, he was prompt at telling her that “the gardener had planted the hibiscus stalks, but that it was still too early to tell if they would live” [1, p202]. Again when they started blooming, he was the first to point it out to his sister Kambili:

“See, the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom,” Jaja said, as we got out of the car. He was pointing, although I did not need him to. I could see the sleepy, oval-shape buds in the front yard as they swayed in the evening breeze. The next day was Palm Sunday, the day Jaja did not go to communion, the day Papa threw his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines” [1, p254].

The narrator is bringing together the one who shows interest in hibiscuses and the one who irritated Papa on Palm Sunday. This helps us to see the hibiscus as a symbol of courage to effect change. We can see this in Jaja’s defiance of his father.

Jaja started to build up his courage when he and Kambili went to see their aunt in Nsukka. It is in Nsukka that Jaja’s and Kambili’s eyes opened toward thinking of freeing themselves from their father’s command as they noticed that their cousins enjoyed more freedom than they. Hence Kambili could trace Jaja’s defiance back to Auntie Ifeoma’s little garden in 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. But my memories did not start at Nsukka. They started before, when all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a startling red" [1, p15-16].

The hibiscus is a symbol of sought freedom. The time they 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" [1, p209]. 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" [1, p16], 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. In fact, the day he started to defy Papa by refusing to go to Communion is the day preceding his remark to Kambili that "the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom," [1, p254] because he himself was "blooming", that is, changing. Hibiscuses changing color is a reflection of the changes happening in Jaja and their family. Kambili says that before Palm Sunday their hibiscuses were still "a startling red" [1, p16] because nothing had yet changed in their household. It is when the purple hibiscus started blooming that changes started to occur.

We see Jaja gradually "blooming" as he moves from refusing to go to Communion on Palm Sunday, to closing his door to Papa by pushing his study desk against it the day after Palm Sunday and refusing to answer Papa's invitation to come to dinner [1, p258], and finally to planning not to receive Communion the coming Easter Sunday, as Kambili can read his mind: "I dreaded Easter Sunday. I dreaded what would happen when Jaja did not go to communion again. And I knew that he would not go; I saw it in his long silences, in the set of his lips, in his eyes that seemed focused on invisible objects for a long time" [1, p260].

Fully "bloomed", he no longer asks permission from his father but just informs him, after talking to Auntie Ifeoma on the phone, that he and Kambili are going to Nsukka right away: "We are going to Nsukka. Kambili and I," I heard him say. I did not hear what Papa said, then I heard Jaja say, "We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow. If Kevin will not take us, we will still go. We will walk if we have to" [1, p261]. And his father agreed. He is now fully himself, mature, as "bloomed" as his purple hibiscus.

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— "Nsukka started it all" [1, p15]—and has brought it now in Enugu. Kambili wants him to spread it to Abba, as she speaks with her mother on their way to visit Jaja in prison: "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" [1, p306-307].

Yet the freedom symbolized by the purple hibiscus is

ambiguous as the one who fought for it willingly goes to prison where he is not free to do anything he wants. His mother, the real killer of her husband to become free, is also troubled in her mind while Kambili tries to console her. They somewhat realize that freedom does not lie in doing just anything one wants but in doing only the good, which is what Eugene was trying to lead them to do: "Everything I do for you, I do for your own good" [1, p196], even though the methods he used to punish them severely to save them from burning in Hell are not commendable. Auntie Ifeoma's piece of wisdom that "being defiant can be a good thing sometimes," that "defiance is like marijuana— it is not a bad thing when it is used right" [1, p144], a worthy of consideration in this context. Maybe defiance has been used too much by the characters who move from one extreme to another.

5. Conclusion

Adichie's first novel is full of symbols. The palms represent victory, the figurines personify Mama and the purple hibiscus is used as a symbol of hope and freedom in the future in connection with Jaja. The figurines and the purple hibiscus are metaphors for Mama and Jaja respectively. There is a pathetic fallacy in that what happens to these things affects or finds expression in the lives of these characters. Yet, the symbols are ambivalent, revealing the complexity of characters which are full of strange contrasts and contradictions.

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