

The Example Of A Hero: A Deconstructionist Reading Of Eugene In Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

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Abstract: *This paper is a deconstructionist reading of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. It insists that there are breaks in the internal logic of Adichie's Purple Hibiscus which allows Eugene, one of the central characters in the text, to be seen as an epitome of a hero; a principled protagonist who is murdered for being unwavering in his beliefs. This reading is necessitated by the perceived tendency observed in current criticisms on the text to interpret Eugene's character based on authorial meaning. Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, which forms the central framework for this study, maintains that owing to the instability of meaning in human language, a text cannot have one possible interpretation, but rather is made up of several and often contradictory meanings. This is what this study reveals about the character of Eugene.*

I. Introduction

The role of characterisation in the determination of the plot of any novel has been amply emphasised. For instance, in his *The Art of Fiction*, Henry James, according to Ayo Kehinde, "directs the novel away from its traditional emphasis on plot to characterization" (239). Perhaps this justifies the character-centred narrative noted in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* which has equally given rise to a character-centred criticism as proposed in this paper. But before further enquiries are carried out on the issue, it is deemed necessary that a statement be made touching the theoretical position of the paper.

Described by Bressler as "the most intricate and challenging method of textual analysis yet to appear" (72), the deconstructionist theory was inaugurated by the French philosopher and teacher, Jacques Derrida, in the 1960s when he presented a series of papers to dispute the metaphysical assumptions of western philosophy from the classical period to the contemporary times. Deconstruction is a complex body of philosophical, literary and cultural principles. In articulating his theory, Derrida was largely influenced by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and, most importantly, by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. In fact, deconstruction is usually considered an "antistructuralist gesture" because although the theory utilises structuralist mechanics, its chief aim is often to attack de Saussure's structuralism.

At a Johns Hopkins University Symposium in 1966, Derrida read a paper entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play" to illustrate the unstable nature of objective reality. Derrida demonstrates that signifieds can, in certain circumstances, become signifiers and that because of this, the logocentric foundation of western philosophy is shaky, thus proving the possibility for the reversal of the hierarchical binary structures say: speech/writing, God/Satan, man/woman, good/evil, adult/child and so on. In this sense, deconstruction is a philosophical operation which must "through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system" (Bello-Kano, 363). Derrida observes that the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is arbitrary because language, as agreed by the structuralists, is a system based on differences. And because the structure of language is unstable, truth is ever elusive, including meaning.

The literary aspect of deconstruction follows consequently from its philosophical 'mechanics'. As noted by Davis and Schleifer, deconstruction, as it bears out in literary criticism, is "a strategy for reading" (207). For Derrida, a deconstructionist reading starts from a philosophical hierarchy in which two opposed terms are presented as the "superior" general case and the "inferior" special case (Davis and Schleifer, 207). Once these hierarchies are established, deconstruction then reverses such crucial hierarchies so as to elevate the "inferior" over the "superior". This is the highpoint of Derrida's deconstruction as Greetham writes: 'To do justice to this necessity of (of overturning) is to recognise that in a classical philosophical opposition, we are not dealing with a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy . . . To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at any given moment (336).

It must, however, be noted that to reverse the hierarchy is the beginning of deconstruction, and not the end. This is so because, according to Derrida, the purpose of the reversal is not merely the inverting of a value system, but rather to give way for the "semantic horizon" – the possibility of any particular kind of discourse.

This necessarily calls for the examination of the resulting status quo in terms of the values that characterise the binary elements. Apparently, this is what Greetham suggests when he writes that “deconstruction does not consist in moving from one concept to another, but in reversing and displacing a conceptual as well as the non-conceptual order with which it is articulated” (336).

Thus, just as the abstract bases of the hierarchy are evaluated before reversal, the philosophical bases of the new hierarchy must equally be examined to establish its validity. The foregoing is founded on Derrida's conception of the text itself. Derrida believes that no text can act as a transcendental signified to other texts, even as Bridgeman notes that deconstruction believes in “. . . the relationship of the individual text with other texts as an assertion of difference which appeals for a change in the order of a genre however overt or covert such assertions may be” (203).

The implication this has for literature is that the meaning of a text is not neatly determined by authorial intention and cannot be unproblematically recreated by a reader. Thus, what practitioners of deconstruction look for is a “slippage” in the text – they note duplicity and expose how a text has violated the very linguistic and thematic rules it has set up. Thus, calling attention to the breaks in the internal logic of a literary text achieves its deconstruction. Within the framework of deconstruction, the text is not a discrete whole but that which contains several irreconcilable and contradictory meanings. For Derrida, then, a singular reading of a text will not end successfully since it is bound to meet an aporia – a point beyond which the reading cannot sustain itself. Perhaps this is what prompts J. Hillis Miller to state, as quoted in a Wikipedia web page, that “deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself” (1). This is the notion of deconstruction as it is applied in the study of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Specifically, the chief aim of this paper is to establish Eugene, one of the central characters in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, as the hero and protagonist, and subsequently to examine the character traits which portray him as such.

Authorial Meaning and the Perception of Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus*

The methodology of most conventional critical hermeneutics predisposes their practitioners to approach a text with the intent of unlocking or interpreting the authorial meaning. This usually is done with the belief that there is an ultimate meaning in a text which, of course, is that intended by the author. This school of criticism may also admit historical materials to act as aids to textual interpretation. While noting that such method of criticism is anti-deconstructionist, however, this paper will attempt presently to review criticisms of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* which tend to evaluate the text and, indeed, the character of Eugene based on authorial meaning.

For one, Onukaogu and Onyerionwu describe *Purple Hibiscus* as “the story of a young girl from a wealthy Eastern Nigerian family which gradually plunges into disintegration” (114). An impression is created in the foregoing interpretation that Kambili is at the centre of the story. But Brenda Cooper is specific enough when she asserts: “*Purple Hibiscus* is the story of Kambili, who is the fifteen-year-old first person protagonist. She lives in the violent and repressive atmosphere of her father, who physically abuses her meek mother herself and brother, Jaja, by beating them into submission (1).

From Cooper's interpretation, it is deduced that Kambili is the heroine and the protagonist in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* while her father, Eugene, is the antagonist. From this point onwards, Eugene's actions are interpreted within the context of this antagonistic posture. For all that he is worth, Eugene is a wife-beater, a terrorist of children, a Catholic zealot and a father-hater, and when he finally dies, no one is sorry for him. Femi Osofisan, apart from establishing Kambili as the heroine also submits that *Purple Hibiscus* portrays “the traumatic moments of a wealthy Nigerian family as it gradually breaks up, mined tragically by the cruel abuses of a father turned callous by an inexorable, fanatic brand of Catholicism” (*Purple Hibiscus*, blurb).

It should be reiterated that the traditional interpretation of *Purple Hibiscus*, such as the ones noted above, aims at unlocking the authorial meaning as purportedly contained in the text. But how far can this reading be sustained? This question becomes necessary because the deconstructionist assumption is explicit in stating that there is a limit to which a given interpretation of a text can go before meeting an aporia. Thus, even among the critics who hold conventional views on the issues raised in *Purple Hibiscus*, opinion differ on characterisation, or at least, there is a general sense of uncertainty and, perhaps, contradictory positions on focus or poetic vision. For instance, Ben Obumsele states: “*Purple Hibiscus* is about the fall from grace and death of an Igbo Industrialist, whose story recalls Okonkwo's tragedy. Both men, Adichie's Eugene Achike and Achebe's Okonkwo, show the same fatal undergrowth of “some complexion or habit that over-leavens the form of plausible manners” (19).

It is possible then that Obumsele is considering Eugene to be at the centre of the story in *Purple Hibiscus* just as Okonkwo is at the centre of the story in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It does not take long before Obumsele reveals his uncertainty in the matter as he writes: “*Purple Hibiscus* **may be** about the fall of an Igbo icon, but there is no solemn dirge said about him. He **may be**, like Okonkwo, a man of very deep pieties,

but as a Christian fundamentalist who insists on confessions every week and observation of early morning fast . . ." (19, 20) (Emphasis in bold).

Obumselu goes on to describe Eugene as "a violent man", but observes that it is not in this light that Kambili, the narrator, sees her father. According to him, Kambili sees her father, Eugene, as "a truly saintly man, a friend of the poor who pays for the education of more than a hundred indigent children, a man of deep human sympathies, a pillar of the church held up as moral example . . ." (21). Perhaps, shocked by certain sterling revelations about the character of Eugene, Obumselu submits that "the objectivity of the text [Purple Hibiscus] is not, however, absolute" and that whatever objectivity is there in the text "is shaken by developments in the plot and incidental imagery which suggest ambiguities of meaning" (21).

At this point, it is clear that the traditional interpretation of Adichie's Purple Hibiscus which seeks to establish Kambili as the heroine and protagonist of the text cannot be sustained throughout the duration of any discourse. Thus, armed with the arsenal deployed from the deconstructionist framework, this paper sets out to establish Eugene as the protagonist and hero of Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, as well as examine those character-traits which substantiate this position based on the evidence available in the text.

Eugene as the Protagonist and Hero in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

Conventional views on characterisation in the novel predispose most critics to view Kambili as the heroine. However, the power and authority with which the reader is invested in contemporary textual theories are very absolute indeed. Perhaps this explains why Obumselu, in the case of Purple Hibiscus, "calls for interpretative restructuring [of the text] in the mind of the reader" because, according to him, "it is structurally obscure that the same Eugene who severely chastises his wife is the one "in tears as he carries her to the doctor" (21).

Characterisation in the novel can be direct as when "an author directly states the facts about a character's personality" or indirect as "when an author reveals a character's personality indirectly, through the character's words and actions or through what other characters say about that character" (Glencoe, 40). In Purple Hibiscus, Adichie employs a special kind of indirect characterisation; for though Eugene is the main focus of the story, Kambili is fronted as the narrator, which at most also serves to mislead some readers into thinking that she is also the protagonist and heroine. What Adichie hopes to achieve by this special kind of indirect characterisation is succinctly explained by Onukaogu and Onyerionwu (20). The essence of this rare type of characterisation lies in its narrative ingenuity. The plausibility of the story would have suffered and its objectivity discredited if Eugene was made the first person narrator. This view is justified by Jerome Klinkowitz when he writes that: "A hero could no longer speak with confidence and coherence and so define himself since under contemporary philosophical pressure, the old 'cogito, ergo sum' had become a farcically painful lie" (202).

One is, at this point, convinced of the philosophical motivation which prompts Adichie to allow Eugene's story to be told by the young shy and submissive Kambili and not by Eugene himself. It should be noted that the usual criticism often levelled against the first person narrative point of view is lack of objectivity, and this is what Adichie cannot afford given the nature of the story told in the novel. How would it have sounded if Eugene were the narrator and said, "I threw my heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étégère* because Jaja did not go to communion".

That Kambili is the narrator in the novel hardly qualifies her to be the heroine or chief protagonist. Ayo Kehinde states that "the most important and the most ubiquitous character in a story is referred to as the protagonist (or hero) . . ." (239). When this definition is applied to Purple Hibiscus, the basic question that arises is: who is the most important and the most ubiquitous character in the novel? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the concept of the protagonist itself since Kehinde's definition tends to equate it with hero or heroine. Ofoelue and Ofoelue define a protagonist as the "chief character in a play or narration" and go on to hint that "he (or she) is the one usually opposed by the antagonist" (73). Another question raised by the Ofoelues' definition is: who opposes who in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus? However, before any decision is taken on the issue, it is necessary to consult Henry James on the matter. Kehinde states that "according to Henry James, 'what is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?'" (240).

Certainly, the character that determines the events in Purple Hibiscus cannot be Kambili. At most it would be Jaja, Auntie Ifeoma or may be Mama. And of course, the persons who determine events should be those who act and not those who react to the actor's actions. Kambili is seen to be merely narrating Eugene's actions around which revolve other actions. In terms of plot dominance, which usually determines the chief character, it is only Kambili's privileged position as narrator that tends to make her a bit more ubiquitous than Eugene. Even then, Eugene's presence can be felt everywhere in the novel. Thus, in terms of plot dominance and determination of event, Eugene qualifies as chief character in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. However, before this is fully determined, the problem of who opposes who will have to be determined as well.

The traditional or conventional interpretation of *Purple Hibiscus* tends to portray Eugene as the antagonist. If this is so, then who is the protagonist who he opposes? Is it Kambili? How can this be when, throughout the story, it is revealed that Kambili adores and admires her father? Ayo observes that “. . . there are characters in a story that are opposed to the protagonist, especially when the story involves moral issues, or when it involves a conflict between good and evil” and goes on to state that “such characters are referred to as antagonists or villains” (239). This situation is quite obvious in *Purple Hibiscus* where Eugene can be seen as the protagonist who is opposed by such antagonists as Auntie Ifeoma, Jaja, the more subtle Beatrice and, perhaps, Papa-Nnukwu.

This way, *Purple Hibiscus* will be read in this discourse as the tragic story of Eugene Achike, a devout Catholic, successful businessman and community leader, who tries to raise his family based on laid down moral principles but fails woefully owing to the stiff opposition he encounters from his own family members including his wife, Beatrice, who murders him in the end and takes over his estate.

The decisions so far taken in respect of Eugene are made possible by the general sense of uncertainty regarding role differences as far as characterisation in prose fiction is concerned. For instance, *The Uvic Writer's Guide*, a web page source on fiction writing, defines the protagonist as “the main character in a story” and goes on to add that he or she is “the character that the reader or the audience empathizes with” (1). In *Purple Hibiscus*, the conventional reading or interpretation will yield the revelation that the reader empathises with Kambili, Beatrice, Jaja and Papa-Nnukwu. However, a close reading shows that at the point where Eugene is deserted by his family and has to fight both the ills of society and the ills of the family all alone, the reader is bound to re-evaluate Eugene only to discover that he or she has empathised with him all along.

In any case, the line between the protagonist and the antagonist is not always so clear-cut, especially in complex works of literature. For instance, in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, though Becky Sharpe is one of the main protagonists, she is greatly flawed and becomes almost unlikeable towards the end of the novel. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, it is difficult to determine the nature of empathy or hatred the reader has for Henchard. The same situation also applies in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, where it is uncertain whether Heathcliff is a protagonist or antagonist. Besides, there is the idea that the well-written protagonists are round characters, which according to Glencoe are “characters who show varied and sometimes contradictory traits” (53). Again, it is possible that Eugene can fit this description, though conventional interpretation will claim that Eugene is a flat character because he remains the same till death. However, a second reading will reveal that the tendency to be flat only applies to the enduring aspects of Eugene's character. Excepting this, the other aspects of Eugene's character are dynamic indeed. *The Uvic Writer's Guide* tends to agree with this position by inferring that though dynamic characters do undergo personal development and change, whether through a gradual process or crisis, they usually remain consistent in their basic nature.

The enduring aspects of Eugene's character which tend to make him static or flat are conditioned by Eugene's principles. Stephen Covey states that “principles are not practices” – but that “principles are guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent value” (35). Eugene's actions are guided by certain religious principles, a situation which tends to render his actions unidirectional, hence flat. But this is not so in all cases because Eugene is also a highly dynamic character. For one, when the reader thinks that Eugene will never allow his children to leave the house for whatever reason, he allows them to be taken to Nsukka by Auntie Ifeoma, who deceives Eugene that the children are going on a pilgrimage to Aokpe (*Purple Hibiscus*, 107). Note that at first Eugene did not allow his children to visit Papa-Nnukwu at all. But after being spoken to by everyone, he changes his mind and allows them to visit Papa-Nnukwu (*Purple Hibiscus*, 61).

In this paper, Eugene will not only be viewed as a hero within the context of the work of literature, but also as the ideal hero the contemporary society of fiction should be proud of.

Heroic Dimensions of Eugene's Characterisation

The etymology of the word “hero” can be traced to a Greek word of uncertain representation (heroes), which became an English word in 1387. The original Greek word literally meant “protector” or “defender” and is thought to be cognate with the name of the goddess Helra, the guardian of marriage (Uvic, online). It is also thought to be a cognate of Latin verb *Servo* meaning “to preserve whole”. Originally, a hero or heroine was considered in Greek mythology and folklore to be a demigod or goddess. With time, they came to refer to characters who, in the face of danger and adversity or from a position of weakness, display courage and the will for self-sacrifice (heroism), for the greater good of all humanity. Heroism of this nature referred to martial courage or excellence though it can also be extended to include moral excellence.

Within the context of heroism linked with physical or super-human courage, Bernard Shaw identifies two different views of heroism. The first is one with attitudes characterised by pride and arrogance, and the individual identified with these attributes “flings into action regardless of danger” (XXII). The second kind of heroism, though as brave as the first, “is firmly tempered by common sense” (XXII). Psalms Chinaka notes that “heroism was actually a by-product of religion and superstition in the classical period” (78). Northrope Frye

identifies heroic types based on his “fictional modes”. These include Mythic hero, Romantic hero, High Mimetic hero, Low Mimetic hero and ironic hero. It appears the character of Eugene can be identified with High Mimetic hero who is described by Chinaka to be “a leader, like one who influences a group of people to join in a common cause” (27).

Andrew Bernstein observes this about heroes: “. . . one fact is abundantly clear: the great men and women whose achievements provide inspirations for millions come with an assortment of specific characteristics. Some are predominantly physicalistic heroes, some primarily intellectual, some are grand-scale characters towering through a work of fiction (online).

Certain descriptions in the foregoing excerpt fit the portrayal of Eugene. Apart from the already established fact that Eugene “towers” throughout the plot of *Purple Hibiscus*, he is a source of inspiration to many in his community and can also be said to be an “excellent example of the principled mind-body integration” (Bernstein, online).

An important fact that qualifies Eugene for his heroic status is to be explained in the nature of his background. His is the story of a man who rose from dust and rust to a position of greatness in society. He narrates his story to Kambili: “I didn’t have a father who sent me to the best school . . . I was a houseboy for the Parish Priest for two years. Yes, a houseboy . . . I walked eight miles every day to Nimo until I finished elementary school. I was a gardener to the priests while I attended St. Gregory’s Secondary School (*Purple Hibiscus*, 27).

It should be noted that Eugene does not tell this story to attract attention to himself but to inspire Kambili, and its effects is seen in Kambili recapturing her first position that term (53). Having arisen to position of greatness, Eugene remains grateful to the church which provided him not only with the material needs necessary for his education but also the spiritual guidance that has continued to guide his path in life. Eugene tells Kambili: “I would be nothing today but for the priests and the sisters at the mission” (47). Despite his huge wealth generated by his vast business empire, Eugene is portrayed among the most humble devout Christians in the church. Note Eugene’s exemplary and highly significant act of sitting in front pew with his family. This depicts his leadership role in the family as well as the church. Eugene’s sterling quality of godly humility is revealed in his kneeling to receive communion despite his exalted position in society and the church. Kambili observes that “most people did not kneel to receive communion” (4).

It should also be noted how Father Benedict often uses Eugene as an example for other church members. In Father Benedict’s speech, it is revealed that Eugene is not only a hero in the church, but also in the wider society (4, 5). Father Benedict says of him:

Look at Brother Eugene. He could have chosen to be like other Big Men in this country, he could have decided to sit at home and do nothing after the coup, to make sure the government did not threaten his business. But no, he used the Standard to speak the truth even though it meant the paper lost advertising. How many of us have stood up for the truth? (4, 5).

Eugene equally supports church projects with huge sums of money. A great philanthropist, Eugene is a pride to his people. He provides for his family materially and spiritually. Kambili testifies to how her father is taking good care of them, especially in terms of meeting their educational needs: “. . . the Saturday before school resumed, Mama took Jaja and me to the market to get new sandals and bags. We didn’t need them; our bags and brown leather sandals were still new, only a term old” (43).

The protection Eugene provides his family members assumes physical dimensions as reflected in the high walls that surround his mansion. As Kambili observes, “the compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high” (9). Eugene tries hard to shield his family from the evil out there in the world. Eugene is portrayed as a deeply religious man who is concerned for his family as he is concerned about his society: so that even at launch table, Eugene prays for the nation (11). This, in turn, reveals the patriotic dimension of Eugene’s character, which is justified by the Award given him by Amnesty World for Human Rights. But it is interesting to also note that all these glories do not make Eugene proud or haughty, rather he is portrayed as a deeply modest individual. Not only does he teach the virtue of modesty to his children, Eugene is modest personified (5).

Bernstein, having demonstrated that the conventional definition of a hero or heroine is inadequate, defines a hero as “an individual of elevated moral stature and superior ability who pursues his goals indefatigably in the face of powerful antagonist(s). Because of his unparalleled devotion to the good, no matter the opposition, a hero attains spiritual grandeur, even if he fails to achieve practical victory” (online).

Bernstein then goes on to highlight the four heroic dimensions to include: moral greatness, ability or prowess, action in the face of opposition, triumph in at least a spiritual if not physical, form. The foregrounding is necessitated by the imperative to contextualise or place within a given perspective Eugene’s peculiar kind of heroism. For one, it should be noted that Eugene is guided by his Catholic Vision of morality and is equally conditioned by the nature of his upbringing. Eugene leaves home to attend Mission school at his formative years and stays there till adulthood. Eugene, as a father, has the responsibility of raising his children within the

framework of his spiritual orientation. It must be noted that Eugene does not fail in this duty until the children are exposed to negative influences by the Nsukka experience. It is at this point that Jaja could have the temerity to stay away from church, an action which is strange and severe enough to cause Eugene to fling "his heavy missal across the room" and break "the figurines on the étagère" (3). This action of Eugene will have tragic consequences later in the novel especially when seen in the light of Moses missing the Promised Land because of his breaking the Ten Commandment tablet. Jaja refuses to attend communion service because, according to him, "the wafer gives me bad breath, and the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me" (16). But Jaja is about fourteen years old and has been taking communion all these years until the Nsukka experience.

This development equally justifies Eugene's constant watch and worry over his children's associations. If Auntie Ifeoma did not deceive Eugene that she was taking the children for a pilgrimage in Aokpe, Eugene would not have allowed his children to go. It would, at first, appear over-protective for Eugene to advise Kambili not to waste time discussing with her mates after school. But Eugene is aware of the negative influence the other girls would have on Kambili, which forms the reason he does not want her to associate with them. Kambili herself reports that these girls "belonged to cliques, giggled and whispered to one another shielded from the teachers" (48). Note Chinwe's indecent dressing as described by Kambili: "Her school skirt was tight at the waist, dividing her body into two halves like the number 8" (50). It is then easy to justify the punishment Kambili receives for disobeying her father by staying behind to chat with these apparently undisciplined peers (51). This is equally the way in which this study deconstructs other actions of Eugene against their conventional interpretations.

Given Eugene's Catholic ideological leaning, it is only natural that he clashes with the indigenous traditions and institutions of his society which his father, Papa-Nnukwu, represents. In not accepting Papa-Nnukwu to live with him, Eugene is more or less concerned for his children's sensibilities. This explains his insistence that his children cannot live in the same house with a heathen. To demonstrate that his action is based on principle, Eugene asks Anikwenwa, a heathen, who visits him during Christmas, to leave his house (70). Although Papa-Nnukwu resists conversion to Christianity and opts to remain a traditionalist, Eugene prays for him constantly, gives him money and even allows his children to visit him" (61). Eugene donates generously to Papa-Nnukwu's funeral even to the admiration of Amaka who says: "Papa-Nnukwu really worried about having a proper funeral. Now I know he'll rest in peace. Uncle Eugene gave so much money she's buying seven cows for the funeral" (200). The "she" referred to in the above quotation is Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's chief antagonist, perhaps.

Central to the tragic twist in the plot of Eugene's story is the Nsukka experience. This is orchestrated by Auntie Ifeoma. Eugene's children even acknowledge this unwholesome change that comes over them during their stay in Nsukka. Kambili notes: "Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka – even Papa – and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order" (205). Thus, from the beginning of the novel, which is set in the time frame of the post-Nsukka experience, Eugene laments desperately: "See what has happened to my children . . . See how being with a heathen has changed them, has taught them evil" (189).

Auntie Ifeoma opposes all of Eugene's ideals. She is a liberal character that experiments the cross-breeding of traditional values with Christian ideals just like her friend, Phillipa, experiments with the Purple Hibiscuses and other plants. Thus, just like the Purple Hibiscuses, Auntie Ifeoma, a Catholic, allows her son, Obiora, to participate in *ima mmuo*, masquerade initiation, an action which gives the basis for Onukaogu and Onyerionwu's conventional interpretation as follows: ". . . Papa does not allow Jaja to participate in the *ima mmuo* initiation ceremony, even though Obiora, Jaja's cousin who is also a devout Catholic has done so" (150). Here is the problem; for why should Eugene, a Catholic, allow his children to be initiated into traditional and idolatrous institutions like *ima mmuo*? This situation has made it necessary for the Nsukka experience to be scrutinised in order to unearth the tragic cause of Eugene's fall and death.

The liberal ideology with which Auntie Ifeoma runs her home is only successful to an extent before it meets an *aporia* and deconstructs itself. Everyone is free to speak and sing and dance and pray, mixing Igbo songs with the rosary recitation. Auntie Ifeoma even encourages Kambili to talk back at Amaka when the latter keeps taunting Kambili: "Oginidi, Kambili, have you no mouth? Talk back at her!" (168). She even tells Chima that "being defiant can be a good thing sometimes" (142). However, it does not take long before the signs of unbridled liberalism start to manifest. For instance, Obiora insults his mother's friend, Chiaku, by cutting into adults' discussion just minutes after Auntie Ifeoma wonders if Obiora would turn into something she could not recognise like the wayward Okafor's son, who is Obiora's friend. To Chiaku's opinion on Auntie Ifeoma's decision to travel abroad, Obiora says: "that is simply unrealistic pep-rally nonsense, Auntie Chiaku" (239). In response, Auntie Ifeoma slaps Obiora and claims: ". . . I do not raise disrespectful children . . ." (240).

It should be noted that Obiora, Auntie Ifeoma's son, is a friend of Chidifu, Okafor's son, who steals his father's examination papers and sells them to his father's students" (238). Jaja's association with Obiora transforms Jaja into a child that can adopt a confrontational posture towards his father, answers back insultingly when spoken to by his father, walks out on the father during a meal. Jaja adopts Obiora's tone even when

addressing his father: "We are going to Nsukka, Kambili and I . . . We are going to Nsukka today, not tomorrow . . ." (255). While at Nsukka, influenced by Obiora, Jaja refuses to join Aunty Ifeoma on a pilgrimage to Aokpe because they do not believe in the appearance of the Virgin Mary. Of course, they believe in *ima mmuo*. The surprising thing is that Aunty Ifeoma smiles and allows them to stay back (267).

Another important aspect of the Nsukka encounter which requires a deconstructionist analysis is Kambili's relationship with Father Amadi. There is enough textual evidence to support the assertion that Father Amadi has certain immoral influences on Kambili and thus justify Eugene's earlier reservations about Father Amadi; reservations which prompt Eugene to say that priests of his kind usually bring trouble (29). Indeed, Father Amadi's flirtatious qualities turn away the heart of many a young girl in the church from God to him. Amaka is liberal enough to tell Kambili: "Oh, all the girls in the church have crushes on him. Even some of the married women. People have crushes on priests all the time, you know. It's exciting to have to deal with God as a rival" (215).

Thus, Father Amadi is portrayed as a compromising and an immoral priest, probably a paedophile, who lures Kambili into having immoral consciousness of him. This position enjoys abundant textual evidence. For instance, Amaka tells Kambili: "You have become Father Amadi's sweetheart . . . He was really worried when you were sick. He talked about you so much. And, *aman*, it wasn't just a priestly concern" (215). Amaka even goes as far as telling Father Amadi to his face of his love for Kambili: "Don't try to be nice, Father, you know you would rather be alone with your sweetheart" (220). To this, Father Amadi only smiles and says nothing. At the market, Mama Joe, the hair-maker, observes Father Amadi's unusual love for Kambili: "Did you say he is a *fada* . . .? A real Catholic *fada* . . .? Do you see the way he looks at you? It means something, I tell you . . . A man does not bring a girl to dress her hair unless he loves that girl, I am telling you. It does not happen" (233). It gets to a point where Kambili even has the boldness to tell Father Amadi: "I love you" (170) and then goes on to narrate: "He [Father Amadi] leaned over the gear and pressed his face to mine. I wanted our lips to meet and hold, but he moved his face away" (170).

Religion, to Father Amadi and Aunty Ifeoma, is a mere rite, a routine, and probably has no eternal significance in their lives. This is reflected in so many instances in the text. First, Obiora is allowed to participate in *ima mmuo*, initiation into masquerade cult, and then both Father Amadi and Aunty Ifeoma only see baptismal name as mere rites worth no significance. When Amaka asks Father Amadi why she should choose another name, an English name, he replies: ". . . it is the way it's done. Let's forget if it's right or wrong for now. . ." (266). Since Amaka is not convinced, she refuses to choose an English name, and is no more confirmed in the church. Aunty Ifeoma's reaction is to finally leave for pilgrimage at Aokpe though not without also compromising for Jaja and Obiora to stay behind. Father Amadi only joins Aunty Ifeoma on the pilgrimage because he sees it as an opportunity to be with Kambili. Amaka remarks: "It's because of Kambili. He would never have come if not for Kambili" (267).

Bernstein maintains that the indispensable prerequisite of being a hero is the exhibition of unswerving loyalty, no matter the opposition, to the values required by human life. It is noteworthy to point out that Eugene does not deliberately set out to select and fight his antagonists just as the antagonists, especially Father Amadi, cannot be said to oppose Eugene consciously. The clash between Eugene and his antagonists is based on the differences in their values. It is thus principle-based. That Eugene does not give in to his adversaries, both in personal and in public life, and that he should die holding on to what he believes, mark him out as an extraordinary hero. It is only when viewed in this perspective that his desperate attempts to re-enact discipline and establish order in his family would not be explained as high-handedness or wickedness. This is true, for if Eugene really punishes acts of indiscipline out of wickedness, why does he cry in the midst of these punishments?

The height of Eugene's desperation to recapture the lost sanity in his family's cerebral wholeness is captured in the uncontrolled beating of Kambili when he discovers Papa-Nnukwu's painted image and is shocked by Kambili's refusal to let go of the shredded pieces. Note, however, Eugene's weeping at the bedside of his daughter: "My precious daughter. Nothing will happen to you. My precious daughter" (207). Again, after punishing the children for not reporting Papa-Nnukwu's presence in Aunty Ifeoma's house during their stay, Eugene tells Kambili: "Everything I do for you, I do for your own good" (124).

Eugene does not only refuse to give in to the decay in his family's moral principles, he represents a moral force in the larger society. Eugene neither gives nor receives bribe. Yet, Eugene lives in a society gnawed through by corruption. Even Eugene's driver, Kevin, bribes a policeman to pass through a check-point. Kambili observes that "Kevin could not have done that if Papa had been in the car" because according to Kambili, "when policemen or soldiers stopped Papa, he spent so long showing them all his car papers, letting them search his car, anything but bribe them to let him pass" (111). With all their dollars, the military government cannot bribe Eugene. He goes ahead to publish the story that claims the life of his editor, Ade Coker. This incident deals a terrible blow to Eugene and, finally, he is finished off by Mama, his wife.

Eugene clearly embodies Northrope Frye's conception of a tragic hero. For Frye, "the tragic hero has to be of a properly heroic size, but his fall is involved both with a sense of his relation to society and with a sense of the supremacy of natural law, both of which are ironic in reference" (37). It is sadly ironic that it is Beatrice, Eugene's wife, who murders him. Traditional interpretation of Mama's grievous action is mixed, ranging from excuses to an act of love for her children. For instance, Cooper calls it "the terrible revenge of Mama and the figurine spirits" (9) while Osofisan sees it as an act which enables Papa's victims to survive, "rescued by the love that binds the children to their mother, and their mother to the children" (blurb). How is this interpretation true, especially when it is considered that throughout the duration of Eugene's life, Mama does not say anything evil against Eugene either in the secret or in the open? Rather Mama is always full of praises for her husband. Mama tells Kambili:

God is faithful. You know after you came and I had miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our umuna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates, too. They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out . . . But your father stayed with me, with us (20).

For whatever faults Eugene might have had, Mama is not justified in killing her husband, especially based on the statement she makes in Auntie Ifeoma's house about Eugene:

Eugene has not been well . . . He is carrying more than any man should carry. Do you know what Ade's death did to him? It is too much for one person. Do you know that Eugene pays the school fees of up to a hundred

of our people? Do you know how many people are alive because of your brother [Eugene]? (245).

If Mama has ever observed any fault in Eugene, she has never spoken of it. For instance, heavy with pregnancy, Mama experiences tiredness and sits back in the car when it is time for the family to visit Father Benedict after church service. All Eugene asks her is: "Are you sure you want to stay in the car?" to which Mama would have answered in the affirmative, but instead she says: "My body does not feel right" (29) and when Eugene repeats the question, Mama then decides to visit Father Benedict.

John Orr writes that in the modern novel, "Marriage is depicted as no longer a harbinger of comfort, but of endurance and tolerance" (34). In his criticism of D. H. Lawrence, Kehinde states that "the relationship between husband and wife is depicted . . . as intense – ugly in its fusion of love and hate, and beautiful in its raw need for companionship and meaning" (345). And Richard, a character in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, overcome with grief, finds consolation in Moliere's words: "Unbroken happiness is a bore; it should have its ups and downs" (236). All this is necessary to the fact of illustrating that Mama should not have expected a perfect husband in Eugene. Even Alice Walker's concept of "womanism" which Cooper claims form Adichie's vision in *Purple Hibiscus* does not justify Mama's outrageous action because as quoted by Cooper, "Womanism is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (9).

Ironically, though, it is at the point when Eugene desires the comfort and companionship of his wife, having been weighed down by Ade's death, that she murders him. It is after Eugene's death that Mama's true nature is revealed. All along she has held values which were contrary to those of Eugene and has been Eugene's antagonist all the while. She confesses her deed to her children: "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (283). Beatrice goes on to assume a dictatorial posture in the house. For instance, she locks out sympathisers after Eugene's death; she refuses to mourn her husband and does not attend the first and second year memorial masses in honour of Eugene (288).

Frye appears to explain this situation as follows:

This particular thing called tragedy that happens to the tragic hero does not depend on his moral status. If it is causally related to something he has done, as it generally is, the tragedy is the inevitability of the consequence of the act, not in its moral significance as an act. Hence the paradox that in tragedy, pity and fear are raised and cast out (38).

It would appear then that the fate of Eugene is as a result of his weakness, which is that of striving for perfection in the world of humans and their undying frailties. This is a consequentialist view of morality which "hold[s] that the sole basic criterion of right and wrong conduct is the consequence that it brings into being" (Oke and Esikot, 94). However, it must be stated that Eugene is mostly opposed for those virtues and attributes only human beings aspire to attain. This forms a huge paradox concerning human nature – that man begrudges and hates another man for what he cannot have himself. For Eugene, the dimensions of his heroic life are reinforced by his tenacity and for his holding on to his laudable ideals until the end.

II. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that contrary to traditional or conventional interpretation of Eugene in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, a deconstructionist reading reveals multiple and contradictory meanings on Eugene's character. The main purpose of this reading, however, has been to portray Eugene as an ideal hero

– a patriot and caring parent. This aim has been achieved through the use of the deconstructionist theory to stand down Kambili from her heroine position and have Eugene elevated to the status of a hero. Apart from highlighting the internal breaks in the texts which yield evidence to support heroic assertions about Eugene, it has also been necessary to deconstruct prominent Eugene's antagonists so as to demoralise their values with a view to rationalising the acceptance of Eugene's ideologies and values. However, this deconstructionist reading, it must be said, is never final, as there are other possibilities of meaning in the primary text. This is in keeping with the tenets of deconstruction which have it that a particular reading cannot go beyond a given point without deconstructing itself.

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