“God [...] expects perfection.” Norms, forms and performance in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

Eva Ulrike Pirker[1]

Introduction

Intellectuals of the independence and decolonial movements such as Frantz Fanon have unmasked “European achievements, European techniques and the European style” within African contexts as damaging narratives that “ought no longer to tempt us and to throw us off our balance” (Fanon 1963, 312). Yet in the twenty-first century, the legacies of an informal colonialism of values and norms as well as of patterns and forms of conduct and expression continue to linger. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), performance and achievement are explored on several levels and within a number of norm-generating societal frameworks. In this short paper, which is part of an ongoing comparative investigation of literary engagements with meritocratic narratives, I want to shed light on some aspects of Adichie’s literary engagement with oppressive normative orders. The most noticeable among them, and yet the one least discussed in the abundant body of research on the novel is Catholicism, whose universal claim is challenged by the contingency of Catholic practice *in situ* – here a space which has been subjected to colonialist violence and its postcolonial legacy and is embodied by the figure of an uncontrolled and controlling father. And yet, Adichie’s novel opens our eyes to the insistent presence of an alternative world of ‘organic growth’ that resists and challenges the impact of limiting, imposed narratives of achievement which manifest themselves in multiple normatively structured systems – including the world of literature.

Particular norms within a ‘church for all’

Purple Hibiscus presents the story of fifteen-year-old Kambili Achike, who has grown up in a wealthy household in the city of Enugu in the 1980s, receiving a strict ‘Catholic’ education. Catholicism in the novel is only one of several regulative structures, but it comes as one with a particularly strong universal claim.[2] While the self-proclaimed ‘church for all’ offers orientation and guidance for some, it is imposed in oppressive situations on others. Kambili’s familial life is one such ‘situation.’ Her father Eugene, whose mind has been

---

[1] pirker@uni-duesseldorf.de

[2] “Catholos” literally means “the entire world”; there are different strands of Catholicism as well as other Christian denominations in the novel, and also Igbo systems of valorisation.

'colonised' by the imported framework of belief and an accompanying ethics of hard work and prayer, inflicts terror on his wife and two children in that he acts as the controlling executor of a "God" who "expects perfection" (Adichie 2013, 47) under all circumstances – be it with regard to Kambili and her older brother Jaja's performance at school or his wife's fulfilment of her societal obligations – and punishes the slightest weakness severely and beyond all proportions. Kambili has internalised her father's standards and is devastated when she comes second in her class, because she wanted "to do as well as he had done":

> Nobody had spent money on his own schooling, especially not his Godless father, our Papa-Nnukwu, yet he had always come first. I wanted to make Papa proud [...] I needed him to [...] say that to whom much is given, much is also expected. [...] But I had come second. I was stained by failure. (Adichie 2013, 39)

This quote may suggest Eugene's indebtedness to a particular strand of Catholicism also invoked in the authoritative figure of "Father Benedict," the priest of St. Agnes,[3] which Eugene's money has turned into the most beautiful church in the diocese (28, 136) and which figures as yet another trophy in his exceptional life: best student, market-leading producer of sweets, owner of the "*Standard*," the only newspaper that writes "the truth" (136, 201) and has "the best" editor (5, 25).[4] The Benedictine principle of humility and absolute obedience is perverted in the novel's (post-)colonial context in the establishment of a set of sins and corresponding punishments, and hence an extreme case of normative orders. Eugene not only aspires to observing the highest standards himself, he outdoes himself to ensure that his family do the same – and in the process loses sight of his self-righteous behaviour that in the intimate circle of his family gets out of hand. After 'punishing' his wife so violently that she has yet another miscarriage he forces her and their children to "recite sixteen different novenas" for her "forgiveness" in the presence of Father Benedict (35). Only in hindsight does it occur to Kambili, who has become a successful 'product' of her father's concept, that "I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for" (36).

Purple Hibiscus is not simply a critical, postcolonial interrogation of the validity of Christian norms imposed on African contexts. It is, among other things, an exploration of Catholicism's contradictions and complexities, which also present themselves in the Enugu context described, but which are hardly limited to that context. The novel engages centrally with Eugene's perverted religiousness which goes hand in hand with his colonised mind, but it also presents a significant variety of beliefs and a plurality of Catholic practices and attitudes. It does not, ultimately, revoke the ideal of a universal church that *can* accommodate difference and controversy. Adichie has written elsewhere about the transformations she herself has undergone vis-à-vis Catholicism, developing from "a dedicated Catholic apologist" to a disenchanted observer of "the gaudy melodrama the majesties of Catholic rituals could be" and a critic of the church's quickness "to ostracize and humiliate," without, however, opting entirely out (Adichie 2015). The ambiguity of the church, which comes with an appealing universal claim but inadequate particular practices, is worked through at length in *Purple Hibiscus*, and has implications far beyond the (post)colonial context it is set in. The novel negotiates the shared human desire to be embedded in a meaningful, spiritual-communal scheme and the challenge of accommodating, as a society, the variety of forms that this desire has produced. That the principles of the "church for all" and other Christian denominations are not only received and consumed, but indeed "brewed in African pots" in processes of inculturation (Orobator 2008) and indeed transculturation is a recurring subject in *Purple Hibiscus*.[5] Practices and norms are created here and then carried into the world, as Father Amadi's impending mission in Germany exemplifies (Adichie 2013, 172, 267).

---

[3] The suggestion of the Benedictine credo of obedience and perseverance should not be mistaken for a direct reference to the relatively small and recent presence of the Benedictine mission in Enugu. Rather, that credo is perfectly translatable to the lingering colonialist agenda described in the novel. It also presents a reversal – not a suspension – of the Protestant Prosperity Gospel.

[4] The editor, Ade Coker, becomes a martyr when he is assassinated by the government for his coverage of the murder of Nwankiti Ogechi (199-200, 206-07). Both Coker's and Ogechi's fates show analogies to that of the writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa.

Contingent norms: System 'Eugene'

The diversity of approaches to spirituality and community in Enugu is only gradually revealed in the novel. The titles of three of its four parts spiral around Palm Sunday – i.e., the triumphant celebrations prior to the fall, martyrdom and resurrection which holds the promise of revelation. Already the novel's opening phrase "Things started to fall apart at home" (Adichie 2013, 3) references not only a web of world literary texts that engage with the painful coming apart of established orders, but takes this recurring process right into a particular, miniature and private context.[6] In Kambili's home, where Eugene's ideals have become dogmata, the behaviour of the family members is apprehended in relation to the established standard, and deviant behaviour is sanctioned – all for the sake, this becomes very clear in the opening pages, of affirming and universalising a standard that is highly contingent.

Eugene's 'system' of perfection has its foundations in his own experience of having to excel against the odds within a structure that has offered him a ladder. In order to climb it, he has decided to reject the first system of values and practices he has been passed on by his family. His Christian name, Eugene, which literally means “well-born” becomes part of his narrative of himself as exemplary, responsible representative and upholder of standards. The synonymity between the character of Eugene and the oppressive standards governing the Achike family has given rise to a number of feminist readings.[7] Beyond this, it is a powerful comment on the impact, and the simultaneous randomness, of social norms that are taken for granted: That they are in place and are being observed does not imply that they are intrinsically meaningful, beneficial or good, although they provide individuals with a sense of orientation. The process of emancipation from the ‘system Eugene’ is indeed not an unequivocal success, either, but ambivalent, even after his death. Jaja and Kambili, who have become acquainted with alternative systems of communality and valorisation at their aunt’s home in Nsukka, are gradually feeling their way out of the “silence”[8] in which they had endured their father’s ‘love.’ Their mother Beatrice, principal recipient and apologist of Eugene’s violence, who eventually turns into his murderer, is literally falling apart: After his death she is described as dishevelled, her clothes ill-fitting and falling from her body (Adichie 2013, 295-6, 306). Beatrice’s subversive act of liberation has freed her and her children from their tormentor and effectively enables them to live; it has not served to liberate her from the (at times conflicting) normative orders that hold her in perpetual check: the imperative of motherhood (imposed here via local, Ibo, tradition), the societal obligations as the wife of a public man (imposed by Eugene), the contrastive example of female intellectuals (represented here by Ifeoma), are only some of the narratives, which cast her as perpetually deficient. Her attempts at performing according to the scripts imposed by others, and her attempts at polishing Eugene’s image, as she is polishing the figurines of her collection of porcelain ballet dancers, ultimately break her.

---

[5] That affiliations with different denominations are accommodated within close families without posing practical problems is touched on in other works by Adichie, e.g. in her third novel *Americanah*. In *Purple Hibiscus*, theological debates take are more central stage in diverse settings.

[6] Most notably, it references Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, which in turn references a line in William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming."

Eugene’s violent imposition of rules, which Adichie paints in stark colours – the ‘purple’ in the novel’s title has been read as a reference to Alice Walker’s classic 1982 novel *The Color Purple* (Nwokocha 2019, 376)[9] –, blurs the fragile sense of control he retains over his own life lived in an imperfect space, i.e. the new Nigeria in the violent decades following independence, a clear case of an ‘underachieving nation’ in McClelland’s problematic assessment (cf. Pirker, Hericks and Mbali, 3). Through a complex mirroring of societal processes within the presented family sphere (cf., e.g. Toivanen 2013, 104-

---

[7] Sandra Nwokocha offers a good summary of approaches (2019, 368-69) and reads *Purple Hibiscus* as radical feminist text.

[8] “Silence” and “speaking” are recurring terms in Adichie’s exploration of the possibility of agency (e.g. in the title of the fourth section of *Purple Hibiscus*, “A Different Silence: The Present” [Adichie 2013, 293]).

[9] Nwokocha argues that the reference has given rise to readings of *Purple Hibiscus* as womanist text. Rather than highlighting the common theme of interfamilial violence and inherited pressure, she uses the reference to draw attention to the figure of Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister and the associative web of images of resistance liked to her.

05) Adichie displays the discrepancy between ideals and the challenging practice (and pressure) of abiding by them or aspiring to them, and draws attention to the contingency of any ideal. Just as the young nation state – a concept fixed in the tradition of European enlightenment thought as the gold standard achieved through the victory of ratio over tyranny – is ill at ease in *Purple Hibiscus*, afflicted by coup after coup so that it needs to be "prayed for" and protected (cf. Adichie 2013, 11, 43), Eugene, celebrated as a "man of integrity" (42), is described as afflicted throughout the novel, the face "swollen [...], with pus-tipped rashes spread across every inch" (6). The trope of bodily affliction (252, 258) and physical imperfection here functions as allegory of the comparatively imperfect state of Nigerian politics. Eugene's success against all odds, like the running of the country, comes at the cost of his moral corruption and a blindness for his own entanglement in a system that is ill-functioning because it has been violently imposed rather than organically evolved.

Resisting organisms: Spread / growth against the progress paradigm

Organic growth is multifaceted and given significant space in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is staged as counterpoint against the imposition of norms and the (respectively contingent) concept of a singular path to achievement (or salvation). The celebration of multitude is not only embodied in Auntie Ifeoma's pragmatic integration of different practices and forms of belief in her day-to-day familial life. It recurs in the novel's treatment of living organisms and their interaction, ranging from the human body to plant life. The hibiscuses in the novel, for instance, remain gloriously unaffected by normative orders: they flourish. That they metaphorically mirror situations in the plot through their colours, which signal their environment's degree of subjection to normative terror, allows for a reading of them as symbols for oppression and liberation respectively (cf. Adichie 2013, 16). Understanding *Purple Hibiscus* within an activist, and particularly feminist, tradition, however, is a controversial enterprise because such traditions, too, have generated exclusive narratives of achievement (cf. Dosekun) that Adichie's novel interrogates. As Chielozona Eze argues, its female figures neither seek to "dethrone man nor to enthrone woman," but to create a society where "human beings flourish" (Eze 2008, 115). What is more, in *Purple Hibiscus* the very notion of progress and the vertical rise in a Christian-capitalist understanding is disturbed by organisms that flourish and by a nature that challenges man's delusional narrative of the ladder (cf. Littler 2020, 17-9) both horizontally and from below: The "dust-laden winds of harmattan" yanking "the needlelike leaves from the whistling pines, covering everything in a film of brown" (Adichie 2013, 53) and the winding earthworm, whose "purplish-brown body contrasted with the whiteness of the tub" from which it emerges in Auntie Ifeoma's bathroom (232), are intruders in humanly-designed spaces, oblivious to human control and following other directions.

Ifeoma's garden,[10] significantly, does not need watering "because the sky did it. Anthills had risen in the newly softened red soil […] like miniature castles," and Kambili "savor[s] the smell of green leaves washed clean by rain […]. The allamanda bushes […] bloomed heavily with cylindrical flowers" (225). Spreading rather than growing one-directionally, nature and organisms have ways of imposing themselves – regardless of, beyond, and at times against, human ratio. This includes the human body, which is torn between its own organic 'logic' and the norms and rational (i.e. religious) narratives imposed on it, epitomised in the porcelain figurines of ballet dancers Beatrice polishes after each endurance of Eugene's 'punishments.' The rebelling body not only becomes apparent in Eugene's afflictions (which he plays down as "nothing serious" [252]). A bodily reaction to the communion wafer triggers Jaja's rebellion (6). Kambili's experience of her revolting body becomes overwhelming: Whereas her mind does not question the imposed norms and the accompanying violence, her body does. Swallowing the luxurious food at her home becomes a torture (cf. 12, 14, 15), studying becomes almost impossible as the letters on the page turn to blood, "flowing from Mama, flowing from my eyes" (35, 37). Beyond providing a graphic example of an organism which literally rebels against a violent 'ratio,' the bloody letters can be read as a strong image of the violence of the de facto not-so-informal colonialism of values, norms and "style" that Fanon exposed as psychologically damaging (Fanon 1963, 312).

Bloody letters: *Purple Hibiscus* and the world of literature

The medial form Adichie uses, the novel, is an achieving genre in European history and worldwide, whose emergence and development as literary form coincided with the parallel emergence and development of European enlightenment thought *and* European colonialism. Like Western religious practices, this highly successful literary genre has been imposed, written back to, claimed and transformed in various ways on the African continent. By referencing and evoking Achebe's trilogy, but also other works from the continent, e.g. Tsitsi Dangarembga's highly successful *Nervous Conditions*, Adichie inscribes herself in a decolonial literary tradition.[11] In these novels of decolonisation, the presence of the past manifests itself inter alia in the presence of their form. Like Dangarembga's, Adichie's novel can be described as a *bildungsroman*, the paradigmatic form for literary engagements with individual development, but she disrupts the form in significant ways, not only by pitting the one-directional principle of the genre against the spread and multitude of nature and the cyclical principle of the church year, which serves as one structuring element; in her novel, it is not the individual whose flaws and immaturity have to be 'evened out' in order to become compatible with norms, but the normative orders are flawed, are quite literally "nervous conditions." When things fall apart, the protagonists in *Purple Hibiscus* cannot rely on norms and forms passed down from a previous generation, but have to invent viable structures for themselves that can accommodate all generations. There are indeed no certainties at the end of Adichie's novel to which her protagonists can return – except the prospect of "new rains."

---

[10] The garden is the foundational image of achievement in colonialist discourse. Ifeoma's garden can thus be regarded as an (albeit temporarily) reclaimed space and moment of empowerment. The space rented by Ifeoma and her children is ridiculously cramped, especially when compared to the luxurious space owned by Eugene, but it is a space of growth, also beyond the literal sense.

[11] *Nervous Conditions* is an obvious foil and a paradigmatic novel of formation. Its title, too, references another decolonial text, Jean Paul Sartre's introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The web of texts that Adichie's novel invokes and participated suggests yet another kind of non-linear, multi-directional spread and presence.

Adichie could build on a tradition and a web of Anglophone Nigerian and African literary works when writing *Purple Hibiscus*, but she could not build on the reputation she enjoys today. In hindsight, Adichie's first novel has often been read with more recent debates about Afropolitanism, a narrative of achievement in its own right (cf. Selasi 2013; Eze 2014), in mind. *Purple Hibiscus*, however, is hardly a self-assertive Afropolitan articulation, but a counternarrative infused with the presence of the past and the uncertainty of the future. It is a searching – and form-searching – account of the multifaceted pressure to perform in an African context that in the twenty-first century continues to be heavily marked by normative orders whose principal violence inheres in their universal claim. By having her protagonists gradually interrogate the ways things were done, Adichie's novel emphasises the need for a conviviality that accommodates difference – which may be the highest achievement any society can aspire to.

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1958. *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2013. *Purple Hibiscus*. London: Fourth Estate.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 2015. "Raised Catholic." *The Atlantic*, October 14, 2015. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/catholic-pope-francis-chimamanda-adichie/409237/.

Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 2004. *Nervous Conditions*. Banbury: Ayebia Clarke.

Dosekun, Simile. 2015. "For Western Girls Only? Postfeminism as Transnational Media Culture." *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 6: 960-75.

Eze Chielozona. 2008. "African feminism: Resistance or resentment?" *Quest: An African Journal of Philosophy/Revue Africaine de Philosophie* XX, no. 1-2: 97-118.

Eze, Chielozona. 2014. "Rethinking African Culture and identity: the Afropolitan model." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26, no. 2: 234-47.

Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press.

Littler, Jo. 2020. "Neoliberal Meritocracy, Racialization and Transnationalism." In *Forward, Upward, On-*

ward? Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts, edited by Eva Ulrike Pirker, Katja Hericks and Mandisa Mbali. Düsseldorf: hhu books, 17-20.

Nwokocha, Sandra. 2019. “Subversive Responses to Oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus.” The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no. 3: 367-83.

Orobator, Agbonkhianmeghe Emmanuel. 2008. *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.

Pirker, Eva Ulrike, Katja Hericks and Mandisa M. Mbali. 2020. “Introduction: Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts.” In: *Forward, Upward, Onward? Narratives of Achievement in African and Afroeuropean Contexts*, edited by Eva Ulrike Pirker, Katja Hericks and Mandisa Mbali. Düsseldorf: hhu books, 1-11.

Toivanen, Ana-Leena. 2013. “Daddy’s Girls? Father-Daughter Relations and the Failures of the Post-Colonial Nation State in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Véronique Tadjo’s *Loin de Mon Père*.” *A Review of International English Literature* 44, no. 1: 99-126.

Selasi, Taiye. 2013. “Bye-Bye Babar.” *Callaloo* 36, no. 3: 528-30. First published in: *The LIP* #5 *AFRICA,* March 3, 2005. http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76.

Walker, Alice. 1982. *The Color Purple*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.