



## Analyzing Dislocated Nigerian Identities in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Purple Hibiscus" and Chigozie Obioma's "The Fishermen"

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### Abstract:

The concept of identity has varied facets. It is not a static concept but something that is constantly undergoing change. It is through identity that we define or understand ourselves and the world around us. The idea of a national identity for a newly independent post-

colonial nation involves a negotiation between the old and the new, and the product is not simply a homogeneous copy of either, but a hybrid mix of both cultures. In this paper, with the two primary texts *Purple Hibiscus* and *The Fishermen* set during tumultuous times of post-independence 80s and the political struggles for democracy in 1990s with the coming to age stories of both texts, these bildungsroman serve as a symbolic representation of Nigeria's journey as an independent nation free of colonial hegemony. The background of erupting violence within the country in forms of military coup accompanied by a growing instinct of mimicking the colonizer's culture reflects how a new identity was being developed. In this respect, my research aims to use Homi Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry' and 'hybridity' to analyse how this new Nigerian identity is a product of the colonized subject's mimicry of colonial culture and their negotiations with the pre-colonial traditions. Henceforth, the result is not exactly a duplicate copy but something different. The two secondary readings "Revolutionary Politics" and Poetics in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman*: The Coming-of-Age of the Individual and the Nation in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and "Half and Half Children": Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel will help in identifying in this essay how the works of literature narratively represent this struggle of understanding the complex relationship between the self and the identity that is being formed. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in "The Dangers of a Single story" touches the question of what the identity of is oneself and how the dichotomy between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized subject work towards establishing the definition of self and identity. This talk will help in analysing how the contemporary writers in Nigeria are using narratives and storytelling techniques in developing an identity for themselves.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how these contemporary literary works highlight and trace the development and negotiation of this new Nigerian identity where ideas of culture and religion appear displaced and tangled between the teachings of the fathers and the white man.

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Identity, Bildungsroman, hybridity.

## Introduction

“Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.” (Adichie, *The Dangers of a Single Story*) Writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her talk on “The Dangers of a Single Story” emphasizes on the importance of narratives in developing an identity for the self. The role and power that different facets of narratives hold in budding the idea of identity. The concept of Identity is a tool for understanding one’s own self and the world around us. We develop our own understanding based on the socio-political and cultural environment we inhabit. Identity is not built-in vacuum but is intrinsically influenced by the society. Based on these tropes how does one analyse the discourse of Nigerian Identity reflected in the works of literature produced by the third-generation writers. What exactly is the new Nigerian identity? How has this identity been shaped over the years under the influence of colonialism, religious conversions to Christianity, Civil War and the declaration of Republic of Biafra? The study primarily focuses on these questions and tries to analyse through the works of literature, the role of these literary representations in shaping the contemporary Nigerian Identity. The works under study predominantly highlight how the third-generation writers approach the discourse of identity by juxtaposing the spiritual-ancestral representations of the past with the present socio-cultural atmosphere (guided by military and religious violence) and creating a dialogue of their own. The study focuses on Homi Bhabha’s concepts of ‘mimicry’ and ‘hybridity’ in critically examining the journey of developing the concept of Identity by Nigerian authors.

## Literature Review

Recent scholarship on third generation Nigerian writing has focused on the new direction that these writers are taking in developing their

identities. Jane Bryce in her essay, "Half and Half Children": Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel" talks in depth about the use of realism as a mode of writing by the third-generation women authors combined with fiction and pre-existing modes of expression. Bryce uses Oyeronke Oyewumi's theory on African feminism and how these 21<sup>st</sup> century novels have developed new feminine identities which are performative and also revisit the old ones. The shift from the mythologised ideal feminine characters to female protagonists that have an exchange of their own is the direction in which third generation Nigerian writing by female authors are moving in. Bryce also critically examines the use of twins and the acceptance of the negative connotations of the figure of Ogbanje by these female authors in developing an alternate feminine other or a shadow which is not something simply handed down to them but a form of identity that makes its way from the masculine discourse of Anglophone literature.

Scholarships on the use of the genre of Bildungsroman is yet another critical focus of research on third generation Nigerian authors. With a background of post-colonial disillusionment supplemented by the failing economic, political, and social structures in Nigeria, **Cédric Courtois** in his essay "**Revolutionary Politics and Poetics in the Nigerian *Bildungsroman*: The Coming-of-Age of the Individual and the Nation in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015)**" critically analyses the use of Bildungsroman genre as a metaphor for the nation. He talks how the *bildungs* of the individual character in *The Fisherman* is allegorical to the *bildungs* of Nigeria as a nation. Set across in 1990s when Nigeria faced the most turbulent times of political and military upheavals, the open-ended ending of Obioma's novel is analysed by **Cédric Courtois** as a mirror to the declining state of Nigeria but nevertheless, this open ending also offers a ray of hope in the form of young characters David and Nkem, representing the future generations as seeds of hope for Nigeria.

With their detailed focus on the forms of narration and genre these works provide critical insights into the development of post-colonial

Nigerian writing. However, there is no such study that analyses how the writings of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chigozie Obioma unravel the complexities of this new third generation Nigerian identity. My research aims to fill this gap by critically analysing the use of narrative and storytelling techniques adopted by these third-generation authors to search for their own identity. The modes of narration itself entangled between realism and African oral culture represent the displaced Nigerian identity where violence and religion are grounds of struggle in forming an identity which is a hybrid mix of the father's and the white man's traditions.

## **Religion and Violence as Apparatuses of Dislocation**

The effect of the sociological, political, and cultural environment on an individual and his understanding of self has been discussed at length in theory. So has been the role of ideological apparatuses and state apparatuses like Church and military in defining the reality of a people. Homi Bhabha in his foreword to *Black Skin, White Masks* also talks about "the visibility of cultural "mummification" in the colonizer's avowed ambition to civilize or modernize the native which results in "archaic inert institutions [that function] under the oppressor's supervision like a caricature of formerly fertile institutions"" (Fanon, xxvii), surfacing the role these institutions have served as a foundation in creating the fragmented identities of the colonial subjects.

The cumulative role played by religion and violence in development and negotiation of the contemporary Nigerian Identity, surfaced in the literary representations of the third-generation writers serve as a catalyst in understanding their forging of a new identity while also drawing from the old ones.

Adichie in *The Purple Hibiscus* sews a complex pattern of identity and religion which Kambili needs to unravel in order to locate her own self. Adichie carefully crafts the differing sense of faith between the two generations. While Papa's vehement emphasis on almost mimicking the Whiteman's version of Christianity is depicted through his preferences of a white priest, negating the use

of Igbo as language of the God and traditional way of greeting as sinful, Papa-Nnukwu on the other hand follows a more traditionalist approach of reaching out to the ancestors and Gods. Kambili's inability to locate her faith neither in the rosary and Ash Wednesday rituals nor in *itu-nuzu*<sup>1</sup> and *mmuo*<sup>2</sup> procession, represents the displaced ideas of identity in the third generation. When Kambili encounters Papa-Nnukwu in his *itu-nuzu* ritual she regards her sense of displacement, "I did not look away, although it was sinful to look upon another person's nakedness" (Adichie, 168), feeling almost a similar sense of displacement when she approaches the God of the white man, "sometimes I imagined God calling me, his rumbling voice British accented. He would not say my name right like; Father Benedict" (Adichie, 179). Kambili's inability to place herself in either of the two facets of faiths simply illustrates the fragmented sense of self and identity represented in the third-generation literature. Her sense of feeling torn between these two extreme versions of faith arises when she is introduced to Father Amadi's ideas of a more hybrid cultural outlook, "I could not reconcile the blond Christ hanging on the burnished cross in St Agnes and the sting-scarred legs of the boys" (Adichie, 178). This sense of dualities is also exemplified in *Purple Hibiscus* of Auntie Ifeoma's garden v/s the Red Hibiscus of their own household, symbolising the character's tug of war between possession and dispossession.

In *The Fishermen*, Obioma patently highlights the struggle between the religious traditions of the fathers and Christianity. Based on a biblical allegory of brother's tale, the novel accentuates the entanglement between indigenous culture and Christianity. The detailed description of the Church as a sight which appeared almost foreign to the people of Akure with its big lights, Grace sung with a foreign accent. Ikenna and Boja's dwindling faith in Christianity along with the fear of the prophecy highlights their sense of

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<sup>1</sup> *Itu-nuzu* is a form of Igbo tradition of declaring innocence to the ancestors every morning. It is often considered as of the equivalent Rosary.

<sup>2</sup> *Agbogho Mmuo* is a traditional process in northern parts of Nigeria an Igbo tradition, dance and musical performance attributed to the spirits.

dislocation. Obioma dedicates an entire chapter on Omi-Ala river and also specifically chooses the river as the site that brews the fatal prophecy, "Omi-Ala was once believed to be a God; people worshipped it.... Now largely Christians, began to see it as an evil place" (Obioma, 25) carving the river as a sight of contestation between the different faiths. Obioma masterfully bears down this strife between the different faiths in the contestation between the voice of *chi*<sup>3</sup> and the voice of God. Ikenna's death is believed to be called upon by the *efulefu*<sup>4</sup> nature of his chi which is at strife with the Christian belief that it is the sins of the human that serves as the cause of his death. Another agent of this contestation is the description of the madman Abulu. The chapter opens with an Igbo proverb "those the gods have chosen to destroy; they inflict with madness". The alternating purviews on madness are intricately represented by juxtaposing Abulu as a prophet, someone who inhabits both the worlds of spirits and man, an intermediary between the spirits of the ancestor's and the man (Eshu)<sup>5</sup> v/s Abulu as a madman motivated by sexual indecencies, a demon-possessed messenger of the Devil and a terror to the society.

In the representation of Churches and Christianity in both the novels, the writers highlight what Bhabha calls the ambivalence of mimicry, "Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history" (Bhabha, 131). With an imperative on the rituals of rosary, incarceration and the Christian naming of children, the colonised subject in its mimicry is acknowledging its 'otherness' by prioritizing the culture of the coloniser. In *Purple Hibiscus*, in Papa's eagerness to mimic and thereby please the white religious institution and messenger, he unknowingly acknowledges his own 'otherness'. His mimicry of becoming a modest Christian

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<sup>3</sup> In Igbo tradition, Chi is considered the personal God that every human body possesses.

<sup>4</sup> In Igbo tradition, *efulefu* is considered as a bad Chi who leaves its host's body which causes the tragedy.

<sup>5</sup> Eshu is considered as messenger of Orisha deity of Yoruba culture.

who strives to raise from the heathenness of his past invariably makes him Anglicized, which, is like English but not quite the same.

As Cédric Courtois in his essay analyses, “The social and political conditions of postcolonial Nigeria represent a real menace to the *Bidungsprozess*, namely through (generic) excess” (Courtois, par. 17), the detailed description of the socio-political history of Nigeria plays an important role in defining the identity of both the nation as well as individual. Signifying the turbulent political upheavals of 1993 elections, Obioma places the brothers right between the horrifyingly violent military coup. Marked as supporters of democracy and M.K.O. Abiola, Benjamin in his adulthood recalls, “every gripping detail of the riot my eyes saw, every smell of it, filled me with a concrete fear of death” (Obioma, 146) foregrounding the impact of socio-political violence which permanently dented the sense of self of that generation. The increasing anxiety each year surrounding June 12 riots was descriptive of the grim sense of identity and belongingness in people. State corruption and an increased cultural hatred became an adjunct to the failure of the individual and the nation. It is during Benjamin’s sentence that his father writes him describing the detreating conditions of the state rule symbolizing the disillusionment of Nigerian population with its post-independence reality. The theme of violence also lies imbedded in the tale of the story where not only the brothers Ikenna and Boja, disillusioned by the prophecy end up killing each other but on a larger level the mass violence against Northerners (Igbo tribe), appears as a defiance of the ancestral norms where killing of one’s own is considered a sin.

Jane Bryce in her essay also talks about how violence and its depiction has transformed in the works of third generation writers, “Whereas in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s beating of his wife is an abomination against Ala, for which he is taken to task by the elders, in Papa’s case, there are no outside checks and balances.” (Bryce, 56). Adichie’s bildungsroman *Purple Hibiscus* surfaces this changing idea of domestic violence wherein patriarchal violence shapes the lives of the major characters. The novel opens with an act

of violence when Papa throws his missal at Jaja and then goes on to detail various instances of Papa punishing the sins of family members with belt strokes, frequent miscarriages of the mother and an almost near-death experience of Kambili with the justification of purifying their purged souls. Papa's Christian belief of inflicting violence as a form of retribution from sin was completely at odds with Papa-Nnukwu's traditional belief in the powers of women mmuo and Ala, symbolizing the tangled ideas of violence. Adichie also supplements violence at home with equally disturbing violent incidents in the country. The impact of Big Oga's military rule and the death of Ade Coker surface the dispossession of the inhabitants with its independent government. Kambili's *bildung* around these contrasting ideas of violence and religion is manifested in her confused outlook in situating herself in either of the two extreme poles.

Moreover, the genre of bildungsroman in both these texts foregrounds the trauma and the instability that places itself deeply in the generations that closely experience domestic and state-oriented forms of violence. Kambili's inability to strike a conversation and Benjamin's inability to step away from the threshold of his youth, symbolize the fragmented individuals which appear at the other side of a violent aftermath. Their tumultuous social positioning acts as an active agent in shaping their experiences of displacement and dispossession. The coming to age stories traces the development and negotiation that their sense of identity and self undergoes during the crucial years of youth. The theme of migrating to some other, better part of the world (America and Canada respectively) also underlines the displaced sense of identity that these characters inhabit based on their inability to definitely understand and place themselves in their socio-political orbit.

It is in the sense of a displaced panorama that the post-independent Nigerian identity appears dislocated between the fathers and the white man. As Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* examines, "It is not the Colonialist Self or the Colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial

otherness—the White man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body. It is in relation to this impossible object that emerges the liminal problem of colonial identity and its vicissitudes” (Fanon, xxviii), this sense of otherness and its constant denial by the colonised subject surfaces in the form of mimicry of the colonizer’s culture *which is almost the same but not quite*.

In the penal servitude of both Benjamin and Jaja, although both the novels surface the fragmented sense of self and tragic outcomes of being trapped in contrasting ideas of violence and religion but there is also an element of hope in the works of third generation writers. Adichie uses the character of Father Amadi as a middle ground; a hybrid mix of both Christian and ancestor’s teachings. It is Father Amadi’s Igbo grace and identification of Christ with traditionalist views that Kambili first begins to question her sense of displaced identity. Similarly, Obioma in the characters of David and Nkem; the egrets, places a sense of hope for the future of Nigeria and its identity. The cultural significance of Egrets as birds of peace that emerge after a storm underlines the use of fiction and cultural storytelling techniques by these third-generation writers in order to negotiate their own sense of identity. Both Father Amadi and David, Nkem surface as a mode of expression of these third-generation writers in re-defining their sense of self and identity.

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