

Food as a metaphor for colonial power in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Nations with a colonial past have always experienced the impacts of colonisation at multiple levels, even decades after political decolonisation. The colonial nations undergo a sea change not only politically but also at domestic and psychological levels. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* beautifully describes how food and eating habits of the Nigerians have changed drastically due to colonisation. Power and sense of superiority get glued to the food and eating habits of the colonisers. In the process of mimicking the colonisers, who are believed to be superior to them in every way, the colonised renounce the native food that is exclusive to their bio region. Least they know that bio regional food is the one that can truly nourish their bodies. *Purple Hibiscus* exhibits how food is used as a tool to emphasize power and dominion over the colonised. Food and eating habits are not simply an act of pleasurable consumption but they hold within them, a legacy of power incorporated by the colonial rule. This concept is further examined in this paper with reference to Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

Key words: power, regional food, native food, eating practices.

Consuming food is an everyday activity. It sustains life. Eating practices reveal multifaceted relationship between food and society. It involves material and metaphoric features of a culture. Food becomes an important identity marker. It defines gender

roles, social class and social hierarchy in a family and thereby in a nation. Food is a cultural act. “This means that the way we understand and we relate to food, food practices, is always related to our identity, in the deepest manner” (Boutaud 1). Colonisation has had a huge impact over food consumption and eating habits.

Colonisation affects almost every single aspect of the colony in terms of cultural, political, religious, economic and social features. The major undesirable impacts of colonisation are loss of culture, racial discrimination, imperialism, slavery and the like. This paper focuses on food as a cultural constituent and how colonisation disfigures the same. Adichie tactically places concepts of food and its related events in appropriate places of the select novel to show how the Nigerian culture is at stake. In a book entitled *Cuisine and Culture*, Civitello says, “Everything about how humans cook and eat has meaning” (Civitello xiv). In *Purple Hibiscus*, the tension of the storyline begins where Jaja says that ““The wafer gives me bad breath””(Adichie 6). By the term wafer, Jaja refers to the host given during the Holy Communion in churches. It is this term, “wafer” that infuriated his father Eugene who is “too much of a colonial product” (13). The conflict begins with a food that is considered to be divine. In an article about Mesoamerica, entitled *Colonization, Food and the Practice of Eating*, Alvarez says that “The wafers that were necessary for this rite could easily have been made from the native maize, but Spaniards believed that this inferior Indigenous plant could not be transformed into the literal body of Christ, as could European wheat”. A sense of superiority combined with religious ideas gets attached to the system of food of the colonisers.

Colonisation forces Christianity and its principles into the land of the colonised and then they take authority over the land. Desmond Tutu has said that “When the white

missionaries came to us, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said to us, “Let us pray”. When we opened our eyes, we had the Bible and they has our land!” (qtd. in Chapman 363). The dogmas of Christianity has seeped deep into the culture and in particular the food habits of the colonised. It is evident when Eugene asks Jaja if he desecrated his Christian tongue by eating in a heathen’s home. Kambili is surprised by the very idea that tongues can be Christian too (Adichie 69).

Besides being under the chains of religion African food culture got itself entangled in the realm of consumerism and fast food culture. In the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, one finds indigenous foods being prepared in a tedious way. In case of aunt Ifoema she includes every member of the family in the preparation of the food. Stajcic mentions in the paper entitled *Understanding Culture: Food as a Means of Communication* that, “The meaning of food is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who’s at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is rich with meaning” (5). Similarly all the indigenous methods of food preparation given in the novel are empathetic in nature. But it is Eugene’s household which is quite different. He being too much of a colonial product adopts ways of the western culture. Eugene’s family has a maid named Sisi who does all the cooking. Kambili is unaware of how to peel a yam which is evident when Amaka makes fun of her being so ignorant. When human involvement slowly disappears from the framework of cooking it falls prey to consumerism and fast food culture. Adichie makes it clear when Eugene introduces new type of biscuits launched by his firm. He says, “Our wafers lead the market now and this should join them” (Adichie 40).

The scenario of growing consumerism mentioned in *Purple Hibiscus* is in stark contrast to the Nigerian culture juxtaposed in the novel. Papa Nnukwu is a representative of a traditionalist. He pays homage to his ancestors when he consumes any food. This action is a formal part of the Nigerian culture that involves consumption of food.

“He paused to mold a lump of fufu with his fingers. I watched him, the smile on his face, the easy way he threw the molded morsel, out toward the garden, where parched herbs swayed in the light breeze, asking Ani, the god of the land, to eat with him” (Adichie 65).

A simple act of everyday food consumption includes paying respect to mother earth, the ultimate giver and to the ancestors who have worked and lived on the same land earlier. This enriched culture fades away when industrialisation of food creeps in the Nigerian land. When Jaja and Kambili visits Papa Nnukwu, he asks his grandchildren to drink the bottled drinks from shop as it has no link to the tradition by means of being heathen. One can clearly spot how the culture of food and its associated elements fade away gradually. It is overlaid by a western culture. One finds Eugene doing an elaborate prayer before every meals. The crux of both the western and native tradition is ultimately the same. But there is a sense of superiority glued to the western ways.

Pramod K. Nayar in his book *An introduction to Cultural Studies* opines “... culture is a product that is: made, marketed consumed” (7). *Purple Hibiscus* shows how a colonial culture is marketed by terming it to be superior to the native culture in the aspect of food. Food processed in factories are considered superior and more European. Drinking Lipton Tea is mentioned in the novel. Lipton tea is a Britain product and

drinking the same in Nigeria is associated with being more civilised. Jollof rice is a bio regional food of Enugu. Kambili eats Jollof rice with fork and knife and the same action is ridiculed by Amaka. Adichie vividly exhibits overlapping of cultures and clash of the same through the consumption of food in *Purple Hibiscus*.

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