

**The Role of Faith and Ideology in African Fiction  
for Children and Young Adults:  
An Analysis of Achebe's Fiction for Children,  
Purple Hibiscus and Story for a Black Night.**

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African writers have grappled with the question of establishing an identity for themselves, in the shaping of which faith and ideology play a major role. Chinua Achebe believed that the modern African writer should teach and take responsibility in shaping the moral and social values of society. Owing to the erosion of the ethical and communal fabric due to colonization and a series of military coups in the neo-colonial regime, reinstating faith in traditional culture and belief was an essential part of the solution to the problem of identity crisis.

History in the postcolonial period was written from the perspective of the colonized struggle. One of the challenges of postcolonial literature was to suggest how to negotiate the anger, bitterness and mistakes of the colonial period. Facing these emotions and tracing the continuity from the past to the present was an essential part of the healing process.

During this period of social, economic, political and national reconstruction, the role of youth as agents of change was seen as crucial and children's books became vehicles for that message.

The Legon Seminar in Ghana in 1976, stressed on the urgency of producing books specifically for African children, written by African authors, that reflected the African ethos, experiences and world view. (Schmidt, Nancy. 'Legon Seminar on Writing and Production of Literature for Children.' *Research in African Literature* 8.3 (1977):352).

While outlining the goals for West African children's literature, Jasper A. Onuekwusi stated that 'Unity, religious tolerance and patriotism could be themes around which children's literature could be woven.' (Onuekwusi, Jasper A. 'Towards a Reasoned Poetics of Children's Fiction in West Africa.' *Emenyonu and Nnolim* 63-70.)

## **Ideology in Literature of Africa and the Black Diaspora:**

The presence of ideology in literary texts is more pronounced in cultures that had been adversely affected by the colonial process. In fact, according to Peter Simatei

“...texts emanating from such cultures have come to be increasingly viewed as constituting sites of ideological contestations in which ideological positions are constructed to affirm or counter existing views of the world, then it is because such a function is inextricably bound with the more urgent need for self-assertion and self-definition. Hence in most literatures of Africa and the Black diaspora, ideology reveals itself as the agency which functions to subvert hegemonic positions engendered in imperialist discourses.” (Ideology in children’s Fiction: A Comparative Reading of Chinua Achebe and Ngugiwa Thiong’o- Peter T. Simatei.)

In children’s literature, ideological representation whether overt or covert was more urgent. This had to do with the objectives of children’s literature for it was generally agreed that writing for children inevitably involved an attempt to inculcate in them norms and other ethical practices which the writer assumes are upheld by society as its essential premises of cultural formation.

John Stephens has argued that:”Writing for children is usually purposeful, its intention being to foster in the child reader a positive perception of some socio-cultural values which, it is assumed, are shared by the author and audiences. These values include contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture’s past, and aspirations about the present and future. (Stephens, John. ‘Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction.’ New York: Longman, 1992.)”

In African fiction- adult and children’s alike, ideological construction remains the overriding concern of fictional texts. African literature attempts to create an alternative world to the one already dismembered

by European imperialism, and it does this by falsifying the ideological assumptions of colonialism.

### **Chinua Achebe's Fiction for Children:**

Chinua Achebe envisages the same function for his writings. He has perceptively handled the theme of the conflict between ideology, faith and fate in his path breaking novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe's vision of rehabilitating Nigerian society extends not only to adults, it also includes children. His works for children are written to reinstate African dignity.

Achebe witnessed three distinct eras of Ibo history. As a child, he lived in a community where traditional practices still flourished; as a youth, he experienced life in a colonised society; and as an adult, he reached maturity during the era of Nigerian independence.

Achebe, a product of the colonial educational system, had a problem with the literary legacy bequeathed to his society by English writers. To take a quick look at the academic history of Nigeria, it was only in 1965, that three million students were enrolled in primary schools throughout Nigeria. This led to a growing demand for reading materials rooted in African realities for African school children.

Achebe felt that before an African writer could write about contemporary issues, he had to first resolve the question of his own humanity. He emphasized the fact that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans, their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity.

The writer's duty was to help people regain their self-dignity to show in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.

*Chike and the River*, his first venture into children's literature, has a contemporary setting. In his novels he reveals the tenacity, adaptability and receptivity to change that seem to be characteristic of the Ibo society in general. Achebe implies that the past, however ambiguous, however

painful, must be accepted; it cannot be changed. *Chike and the River* offers Achebe's young readers an almost idyllic portrayal of independent Nigeria.

The British imposed new forms of cultural, political, and economic order upon Ibo society but they did not change the ethical framework of the society itself. While the context changed, the moral qualities remained the same; at least this is what Achebe suggests in *Chike and the River*. He side steps many issues in his novels, he makes it very clear to his young readers that the values of traditional Ibo society - hard work, perseverance, individual initiative - should continue to guide their lives in the modern setting.

*Chike and the River* in spite of being a children's book, doesn't have sustained and nostalgic portraits of Umuofia. In this text, the village setting is quickly displaced by the urban landscape. Unlike the characters who exist within the tightly woven fabric of family and clan, Chike is left on his own. In spite of being warned by his mother to beware of the city and stay away from the river Niger, Chike is compelled by his own curiosity to explore the streets of Onitsha and to devise a means of crossing the river.

In a series of loosely connected episodes, *Chike and the River* recounts the way in which Chike finally manages to cross the river and the adventures he encounters on both sides.

Chike's various efforts to secure the one shilling necessary to cross the river take place within a clearly defined moral framework in which Achebe upholds specific social and cultural values while condemning others.

As in traditional African narratives, individual episodes in the story often convey an explicit moral statement. The headmaster, an important character in the novel, is never treated satirically in *Chike and the River* - bas this figure often is in contemporary African literature; his stern, moralistic warning must be taken seriously. His insistence upon the values

of scrupulous honesty, dignity, and self-respect are precisely the same values Achebe himself upholds throughout the story.

Although the school setting provides a framework within which Chike and presumably Achebe's young reader - receives his moral education, he must also learn the proper code of conduct through his experiences in society.

After considering various inappropriate means of securing money, including begging and borrowing, Chike realises that it only after working to reach his goal that he can earn enough money to cross the river.

Chike's subsequent adventures on the other side of the river, his role in bringing a gang of thieves to justice, and his public recognition as a hero bring the moral framework of Achebe's story into sharp relief. Chike emerges as a hero primarily because he has upheld the values of his society. His award is a scholarship that will take him through secondary school.

In *Chike and the River*, Achebe turns away his attention from the evocation of the past and addresses himself to the present. His portrayal of post-independence Nigerian life is buoyant, optimistic and remarkably free of the tensions and conflicts that beset Ibo society in his novels. Chike is neither burdened by the conflict between traditional and modern values as are many of Achebe's modern characters, nor is he degraded by the colonial legacy. Rather he seems to represent the best qualities of a new society poised on the edge of its own destiny.

Later, Europe no longer influences the lives of his characters, and neo-colonialism continues to shape the politics and culture of the society he depicts. The breakdown of traditional values is virtually complete, and the entire society is overrun by greed and corruption.

This angst shapes the theme and tone of his second story for children, *How the Leopard got its Claws*, written in 1972, along with John Iroaganachi.

Deceptive in its simplicity, this story takes the form of a traditional African animal story. It is apparently one of the *How Stories* in African oral tradition, the underlying theme is that of betrayal, the dominant tone of anger and outrage. This story, like *The Arrow of God* and *Things Fall Apart*, portrays with nostalgia a world that has now vanished.

The story begins with an idyllic world where animals live in harmony, guided by the kindness and wisdom of the leopard. None of the animals have sharp teeth or claws except the dog-an obvious misfit in this idyllic setup. A torrential downpour brings about a watershed (literally), when the dog is forced to seek refuge in the common hall built by all other animals; this is when he viciously attacks them and drives everyone out. Faced with the choice of remaining in the rain or accepting the new regime established by the dog, the animals choose to derecognize the leopard as their leader, driving him away with stones and taunts. The rest of the story is concerned with the leopard's revenge, who with the blacksmith's assistance procures teeth and claws and the thunder gives him a mighty roar; with these assets the leopard returns to his village and chases the dog out of the hall.

In an epilogue to the story, the dog staggers to the hunters house for sanctuary, offering his assistance to the hunter in exchange of shelter. Thus, at the end of the story, the idyllic paradise is destroyed, with the animals no longer being friends. The leopard, full of anger, eats up anyone he can lay hands on. The hunter along with the dog goes to the forest and shoots anyone from time to time. Only when the animals make peace amongst themselves will they be able to keep the hunter away.

In the context of the story the leopard's anger, pride and his revenge seem justified, yet Achebe suggests that perhaps the leopard's sense of outrage must be balanced against the greater danger that the hunter represents. Although he moralises and condemns at the conclusion of the story, clearly pointing out the perilous consequence of disunity, Achebe offers no easy solutions.

Thus it can be seen that Achebe's works for children bring about his faith in Ibo society its tenacity, adaptability and receptivity. In addition to pride in the past he reinforces the values of scrupulous honesty, dignity and self-respect - qualities that could shape children and lead the way to a peaceful and harmonious society.

In Achebe's texts a high degree of fictiveness is preserved but they have a strong focus on thematic and moral significance. In *Chike and the River*, societal values appear as bottlenecks to his infantile desires, the most burning one being the desire to cross the River Niger by ferry. The narrative emphasizes conformity to societal norms as the only way to avoid punishment and trouble. But we need to acknowledge the contradictory meaning implied in the text that a his growth takes place ironically through his violation of norms which society considers sacrosanct. Conservative moral positions are therefore challenged since they reject adventure as complementary to the child's growing interest in the complexity of human interrelationships.

In *Chike and the River*, the concealment of an operative ideology is total. In his literature for children, Achebe has covered a considerable historical and ideological distance. In *Chike and the River*, one can feel Achebe's dispassionate objectivity and moral certainty, whereas anger without a political or social focus is evident in *How the Leopard got its Claws*. In *How the leopard got its Claws*, Achebe carefully manipulates the structure and symbolic meanings of traditional animal stories to achieve a powerful social and political statement. Working with the traditional West African bestiary, Achebe has conferred new meanings upon established forms. In view of his sharp criticism of post-independence African societies, particularly during the Nigerian civil war, it is clear that *How the Leopard Got Its Claws* is a political parable about modern Nigeria. The spectacle of disunity within the animal kingdom is too suggestive of the disintegration of the Nigerian federation to be merely coincidental. In such a scenario, Achebe's attitude towards restoring faith in the traditions and values of the past is imperative.

### **Treatment of Faith in *Story for a Black Night*:**

One's faith is thoroughly put to test in the novel by former Peace Corps Volunteer Robert H. Locke (aka Clayton Bess). This is a true story about human greatness. Rooted in the facts of daily life in a home in a West African village, the writer heard it as a peace corps volunteer in Liberia. Using the folk tale structure, this story is a critique of modern day life. The seemingly simple story reflects the moral dilemma that people face.

*Story for a Black Night* engages the reader in moral reasoning and a discussion of the ambiguities surrounding the meaning of selfless love and good and evil.

Clayton Bess- a Peace Corps volunteer, revisited the Africa of the past riddled with Small Pox. The main protagonist in the tale is an old man of colour, Momo, who has seen transition take place in his country. He feels that there is more evil within people than outside of people today. A hint of nostalgia runs across the tale at the loss of the forests, sounds of cars, trucks passing on coal tar that have frightened the birds away from the city.

The Bible is not seen as an answer to questions but the cause of a lot of confusion. The grand-mother hates and it calls it 'evil medicine' (pg10- *Story for a Black Night*). Momo's mother stops reading it and accuses it of bringing on more confusion. She says "Africa is too confused, it is because of the book." (pg 11 *Story for a Black Night*). The story is about moral testing. It begins with Maima, a stranger (an old woman), bringing in the Pox. Maima Kiawu, her daughter in law and pox ridden grand-child enter Momo's house deceitfully.

The women enter their house at night and slink away quietly during the day leaving the pox ridden child behind. The grand-mother, on discovering the pox ridden child, wants to leave it for the leopard in the bush or Mommy Water down the river. However, Momo's mother, Hawah does not want to part with the baby. Old Ma (Momo's grandmother), was plagued by pox herself and had lost her eyesight to it. So she was aware of the ill-effects of pox and did not want her kith and kin to be



affected by it. However, Hawah stands by her decision and asks the grand-mother to take Momo and Meatta away to the town to their aunt Musu's place.

The grandmother feels that books had made Ma (Hawah) different (more humane), she could not distinguish between right and wrong.

“Ma,” she said, “you can never know. You never had book.”

“Book!” Old Ma spit. Pa sent me to school, Ma. You too. What you thought I would do there? I read, and learned. They made me different. I am different.... I don't know right anymore, and wrong. I only know I can't kill this baby.” (pg 29-30 *Story for a Black Night*)

The contrast between the two sisters is brought about when Hawah's sister, Musu reveals that she knew about these women with the pox affected child visiting their house. It was, in fact, the town - dwellers who sent these women to the village, knowingly. Later, Aunt Musu tries to atone for her sins by providing milk cans and food whenever possible.

Eventually, Momo and his mother suffer from the pox sores. They even lose their sister Meatta to the pox. However, Seatta, the stranger's child is saved, albeit with pox marks all over herself. Musu after a lot of contemplation arrives to take care of her mother, sister and nephew.

Finally the reverend's wife feels that Musu did not catch the pox as she had a deep and good heart. Hawah on the other hand had sinned, since she caught the pox! This interpretation of sin by the reverend's wife is intriguing, especially after the ordeal that Hawah had to undergo i.e. sacrificing her own daughter, and her eye, and having endured a lot of physical pain at the hands of the deadly disease.

Hawah is educated and more kind-hearted. She doesn't mind sacrificing her life and her daughter to save an unknown child ridden with pox. Faith in humanity and goodness above religious faith and belief emerges as the overriding theme of the novel. The hands that work and not the lips that pray are important!

### **Exposition to an Assortment of Beliefs in the *Purple Hibiscus*:**

A promising writer like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, very evidently influenced by Achebe's philosophy, has handled the individualistic nature of faith in *Purple Hibiscus*. She has focussed on the strife between new and old belief systems besides the influence of numerous ideologies in the adoption of diverse strains of faith by various characters in the novel. Adichie has dextrously handled the relation between colonialism and religion.

*Purple Hibiscus* captures a character and a nation on the cusp of radical change. Adichie uses her own childhood experiences to inform the lives of her characters. Her main protagonist Kambili is of Igbo descent and is Catholic.

*Purple Hibiscus* is a story of the corruption and religious fundamentalism that grips Adichie's native country. Set in postcolonial Nigeria and told from the point of view of a child, overt political messages are held at arm's length, but they inform Kambili's coming of age.

*Purple Hibiscus* is about a strict, authoritarian Eugene Achike, whose strict adherence to Catholicism overshadows his paternal love. He is a fundamentalist, who has come up the hard way. He owns several factories and publishes the pro-democracy newspaper the Standard. He is praised by his priest, Father Benedict (a rigid catholic priest), and his editor, Ade Coker, for his many good works. He generously donates to his parish and his children's schools. His newspaper publishes articles that are critical of rampant government corruption. However, he believes in an inflexible variety of Catholicism that stunts the growth of his children, who are expected to lead a regimented life .

He disowns his own father and calls him a heathen. He resorts to extreme physical abuse to ensure order. A contrast is brought about by juxtaposing the character of Ifeoma, his widowed sister, against that of Eugene Achike. Ifeoma, a university professor, who although not materially well off, brings up her three children who can think and speak for themselves. She raises them with faith and intellectual curiosity.

Eugene's children love their aunt and find refuge in her middle class, yet comfortable home. It is at her place that Kambili and her brother find their voice. It is here that the seeds of rebellion are planted in the children's minds by their liberal Aunty Ifeoma.

Kambili begins to open up when she meets Father Amadi. A Nigerian-born priest, Father Amadiunlike Father Benedict is gentle and supportive. He encourages Kambili to speak her mind. Through Father Amadi, Kambili learns that it is possible to think for oneself and yet still be devout.

Kambili and Jaja learn to be more accepting in Nsukka. When their grandfather falls ill, Aunty Ifeoma brings Papa-Nnukwu to her flat. Kambili and Jaja decide not to tell Papa that they are sharing a home with a "heathen." It is here that Kambili witnesses her grandfather's morning ritual of innocence, where he offers thanks to his gods and proclaims his good deeds. She sees the beauty in this ritual and begins to understand that the difference between herself and Papa-Nnukwu is not so great. However when their father comes to know about their sharing the home with a heathen ,he punishes his children by pouring hot water over their feet for "walking into sin."

The increasing political pressure in the country is reflected in the violence at home. The office of the Standard is raided and factories are shut down for health code violations. In the meanwhile, Aunty Ifeomais fired from the University and decides to go to America to teach. Eugene Achike dies due to their mother's poisoning his tea. Jaja takes the blame for the crime and goes to prison.

The final chapter of the book takes place nearly three years later. Kambili and Mama visit a hardened Jaja in prison. However, with the leadership in Nigeria now changing again, their lawyers are confident that Jaja will be released. Though Jaja has learned to not expect a favorable outcome, Kambili is overjoyed. She dreams that she will take Jaja to America to visit Aunty Ifeoma, together they will plant orange trees in Abba, and the purple hibiscuses will bloom again.

*The Purple Hibiscus* deals with the coming of age. Both Kambili and Jaja come of age in *Purple Hibiscus* as a result of their experiences. Kambili's narration is striking because it can be concluded that she finds her own voice throughout this ordeal. Both Kambili and Jaja take steps towards adulthood by overcoming adversity and being exposed to new thoughts; here Aunt Ifeoma is the catalyst responsible to change their worldview. Both Kambili and Jaja are forced to reconsider their stance on their grandfather, who is looked upon as heathen, which forces Kambili to question the variety of faith endorsed by her father.

Multifaceted hues of religion and faith are handled dextrously by Adichie. Colonialism is an important force in shaping the faith of the characters in the novel. Adichie draws a contrast between Father Benedict and Father Amadi. Priest at Papa's beloved St. Agnes, Father Benedict is a white man from England who conducts his masses according to the European custom. Papa adheres to Father Benedict's style, banishing every trace of his own Nigerian heritage.

Eugene Achike uses his faith to justify abusing his children. Religion alone is not to blame. He represents the wave of fundamentalism in Nigeria that corrupts faith. The influence of colonialism on religion which is a complex topic in Nigeria is seen as a major force in the shaping of Kambili's father's faith.

For him, colonialism is responsible for his access to higher education and grace. He is a product of a colonialist education. He was schooled by missionaries and studied in English. The wisdom he takes back to Nigeria is largely informed by those who have colonized his country. He abandons the traditions of his ancestors and chooses to speak primarily in British-accented English in public.

Father Amadi, on the other hand, is an African priest who blends Catholicism with Igbo traditions. For Father Amadi, colonialism has resulted in his faith but he sees no reason that the old and new ways can't coexist. Father Amadi represents modern Nigeria in the global world. He believes that faith is both simpler and more complex than

what Father Benedict preaches. Father Amadi is a modern African man who is culturally-conscious but influenced by the colonial history of his country. He is not a moral absolutist like Eugene Achike and his God. Religion, when wielded by someone gentle, can be a positive force, as it is in Kambili's life.

Papa-Nnukwu is a traditionalist. He follows the rituals of his ancestors and believes in a pantheistic model of religion. For Papa-Nnukwu, colonialism is an evil force that enslaved the Igbo people and eradicated his traditions. Though both his son and daughter converted to Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu held on to his roots. When Kambili witnesses his morning ritual, she realizes that their faiths are not as different as they appear. Kambili's faith extends beyond the boundaries of one religion. She revels in the beauty of nature, her family, her prayer, and the Bible.

The individualistic nature of faith is explored in *Purple Hibiscus*. Kambili tempers her devotion with a reverence for her ancestors. Jaja and Amaka end up rejecting their faith because it is inexorably linked to Papa and colonialism, respectively.

Over the course of the novel, both Kambili and Jaja must come to terms with the lingering after-effects of colonialism in their own lives. They both adjust to life outside their father's grasp by embracing or accepting traditional ways.

In conclusion an analysis of these texts by African writers about Africa, reveal a didactic tone running through all texts. It is evident that reinstating faith in the African traditions and morals was the primary concern of writers. Achebe's fiction dealt with in this paper represents two radically different portrayals of Nigerian society. They however reflect the depth of his commitment to the belief that the novelist must also teach, holding up to his society—including its children—a mirror in which its best possibilities and deepest flaws are clearly reflected.

On the other hand, faith is treated as a matter of personal choice in *Story for a Black Night*. It is faith in goodness that forces Hawah to sacrifice

beyond her limit. Hawah's large hearted gesture makes her more appealing to Momo who describes her as: "...I can't lose the picture of her from my mind. Too beautiful, head held high, standing straight and strong, baby to her breast. Besides her, all Africa seems small." (pg 29 *Story for a Black Night*). This text also handles the impact on faith in context of the traditional versus the coloniser's religion. The main protagonist, overcome by nostalgia for the past, seems to favour the former despite its shortcomings. Adopting a middle path would be the best possible way out.

Adichie, a more contemporary writer, reflects the freedom and plurality that exists in one's choice of faith. She believes in exposing the reader to a variety of possibilities in selecting the ideology that could influence one's faith. Once this difficult choice is made, one has to abide by it in order to be at peace with oneself and the world.

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