

ICONS, INDEXES AND SYMBOLS IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Signs abound in literary works and their interpretation form part of the message from the author to reader(s). Unfortunately, most scholars do not regard them as researchable enough to demand scholarly attention. This paper is a re-reading of Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, deploying the engine of semiotics to create meaning. The data for the study shall be comments and material objects, randomly sampled from various sections of the select text and analyzed within the lens of visual and social semiotics. Findings are that the Igbos have a rich cultural heritage which, if caution is not exercised, may die a natural death because of lack of interest in upholding our identity; our legacies. The study concludes that the whole human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs, and that readers miss the fundamental message of a fictional work when there is no integration/interpretation of the verbal and non-verbal clues, which are signs in themselves. The study recommends that the dearth of scholarship in literary semiotics should be discouraged, by all means, for the sole purpose of preserving our cultural heritage/moral and social values that are fast disappearing.

Keywords: Semiotics, icons, indexes, symbolism, *Purple Hibiscus*.

INTRODUCTION

Chimamanda Adichie, in *Purple Hibiscus*, employed a semiotic system that is rich in Icons, Indexes and Symbols. These communication tools (path ways) enlarged the volume, scope and complexity of the book, by the vast interpretations they lend themselves to.

Semiotics, as the study of signs and sign-using behaviour, especially in language, was propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It is a theory that concerns itself with the production and interpretation of meaning. Its basic principle is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as 'signs' in relation to other signs. Semiotics study how meaning is formed – how first we interpret a sign, how the signs draw on cultural or personal experiences, that is the context in which they appear. Signs themselves, according to Eka & Inyang (1996, p. 31), are deployed in space and time to produce 'texts' which use language in context.

On the other hand, Ndimele (2001, p. 12) opines that 'language, whether verbal or non-verbal, is often described as a semiotic system because it entails the use of certain agreed-upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another'. Thus, systems of meaning are analyzed and conclusions drawn by looking at the cultural and communication products and events as signs and their relationship with one another (Eco, 1976, p. 14; Irvine p. 45; Nnamdi & Ikoro, 2014, p. 275). Signs are made up of many different components - words, sounds, gestures (body language) and context (paralinguistic and extra-linguistic features) – all of which combine to create a visual language which aids understanding.

However, the interpretation of signs in texts forms part of the message from the author to reader(s). Unfortunately, not much attention has been paid to the study of signs in literary texts, to integrate the intended message of the author to her audience by bringing the verbal and non-verbal cues to bear in the interpretation and fuller understanding of the texts. The result of this failure is that, for the most part, a reader misses the fundamental message of a fictional work of art.

Thus, this research examines how Icons, Indexes and Symbols operate in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to create meaning. These will help us realize that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs, and that it is a viable means to analyze the logical process, by which we create inferences and make sense of things (Langrehr, 2003, p. 30).

ICONICITY IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

An icon is a sign which refers to the object it denotes, merely by virtue of characters of its own and which it possesses. It is a sign that resembles its object in some way. It is a graphic representation of something or a person. An icon is a sign that is not only known to the public, it generally commands global recognition. Icons are considered as non-arbitrary signs, signs that are visual, concrete or tangible. Icons however, sometimes change meanings depending on their use in different event situations and at different times. Icons do not necessarily have to be learned. Examples of icons include a photograph, diagrams, paintings, images, maps, cartoons, onomatopoeic words (and expressions), etc.

Identified material icons in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* include: delightful...gold-framed family photo (p.11), ...framed photos of Grandfather (p.15), ...*blond life-size Virgin Mary* mounted nearby (p.12), ...*Amnesty World* (gave him a human rights award) (p.13), faded-looking *labels* as every other thing Papa's factories made (p.20), figurines on the etagere (pp. 11, 23), heavy *missal* (pp. 11, 14, 15), ...the water-colour painting of a woman with a child...the *Virgin and Child oil Painting* (p. 126), Jaja turned to the *statue of the preening lion* (p. 140), ...and I saw her, the Blessed Virgin: an image in the pale sun, a red glow on the back of my hand (p. 278), ... the mask (p. 94)...Fela, Osadebe and Onyeka (musical icons) (p. 126), ...huge rosary with blue beads and a metal crucifix (p. 132).

The non-material icons include the Onomatopoeic ...*slap-slap* slippers sounds on the marble floor (p. 15), ... the *thump-thump-thump* of the pestle (p. 20), ...the *clink-clink-clink* of forks and spoons (p. 30), ... *kroo-kroo-krooof* the metal spoon on the pot (p. 172), ...*screech-screech-screech* of the low underbelly of the *Mercedes* (p. 63).

Though icons are ordinarily full of meanings, some of them are however for aesthetic purposes, association/identification and recognition (the photographs, paintings, statue, images, and plaque). Again, some icons validly find interpretations as symbols (as in the case of the figurines, missal, mask discussed in the symbolism section of this paper) and as indexes (an example of which is the labels on Papa's factory products). Also, unusual '*slap-slap*' sound of Mama's slippers is suggestive of defiance and a symbolic indication of the on-set of chaos in the family.

INDEXICALS IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

An index is a sign that is directly connected in some way, existentially or causally, to its object. An indexical sign, or index, fulfills its function(s) by ‘pointing out’ its referent (object), typically by being a partial or representative sample of it. Indexes are not arbitrary, since their presence has in some sense been caused by their referent. For this reason, it is sometimes said that there is a causal link between an indexical sign and its referent. Indexical signs can be symptomatic, that spontaneously convey the internal state or emotion of the sender. Indexicality is based on an act of judgement or inference. They are non-tangible/non-verbal things, something the public may have to be educated on. Anything which startles us or jostles our thinking is an index. Examples are footprints, traffic signs, echoes, medical symptoms, smoke, thunder, non-synthetic odours and flavours, a knock on the door, signpost, a ringing phone or bell, words like ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘here’, ‘there’, etc.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the following have been identified as indexical signs: ...Credo and Kyrie (p. 12), ... the *whirl of the ceiling fan* (p. 15), ...*heard the sound... like something being banged against the door* (p. 18), ...*seventeen-year-old face had grown lines* (wrinkles) (p. 19), ...*faded-looking labels* (p. 20), ...Government Square (pp. 24, 35), ...members of *Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group* (p. 29), ...*Introductory Technology* textbook (p. 30), *St. Nicholas badge* blazing (p. 30), ...pressed the ringer that dangled (p. 20), ...Ogui Road (p. 35), Daughters of the Immaculate Heart (p. 30), ...the *Standard* (pp. 32, 144, 154), ...at the Seme Border (p. 41), ...UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA, ...OPI Junction (p. 118), Marguerite Cartwright Avenue (p. 119), *Nsukka* has no *Genesis or Nike Lake* (p. 125), Mary Slessor Hall, Okpara Hall, Bello Hall (p. 137), Odim Hill (p.139), Bishop Shanahan Hospital, Transekulu (p. 145), ...the *Guardian* (p. 154), The green WELCOME TO ABBA TOWN (p. 63), The title *Omelora – The One Who Does for the Community* (p. 64), ...*agwonatumbe* (p. 94), ...drawn lines in black ink (p. 32), ...*Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools* (p. 216), ST. PETER’S CATHOLIC CHAPLAINCY, UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA (p. 245), ...she look like a *Hausa goat*: brown, long and lean (p. 125), ...EXAM QUESTIONS ARE IN THE BANK (p. 270), WELCOME TO AOKPE APPARITION GROUND, CATHOLICS ON PILGRIMAGE (p. 278), ...and listened to the “Ave Maria” on the cassette player (p. 39), ...when I heard the sound: swift, heavy thuds on my parents’ hand-carved bedroom door (p. 41), ...*Introductory Agriculture for Junior Secondary Schools* (p. 42), ...the Peugeot 505 with the factory name emblazoned on the passenger door (p. 42), ...Head of State (pp. 45/46), ...there was a postscript in italics where he thanked his publisher: “*a man of integrity, the bravest man I know*”(p. 50), Blessed Virgin Mary medal (p. 98), EziIcheke (p. 93), His Royal Highness(p. 98), Ninth Mile (p. 62), Remy martin (p. 62), “that” (pp. 20, 106).

Examples of symptomatic indexical are: Papa’s *voice was low, very low*, ... face looked swollen already, *with pus-tipped rashes* spread across (pp. 14, 23), ...shocked eyes begged him to seal his mouth (p. 14), *Papa swayed from side to side* (p. 15), *Papa’s breathing was always noisy, but now he panted as if he were out of breath* (p. 23), ...*startling me although her Igbo words were low and calming. In the same breath, without pausing ...* (p. 16), ...*compound walls would crumble ...and squash the frangipani trees...sky would cave in, the Persian rug...would shrink, ...my body shook from coughing* (p. 22), ... but the aromatic soup only made me nauseated (p. 23), Papa ... slumped back on his seat, his cheeks dropped (p. 22), When Papa started the prayer, *his voice quavered more than usual* (p. 40), *Papa’s gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual* (p. 41), ...*Jaja’s tone made me turn and stare at him. His brows were not knotted in worry, as I was sure mine were* (p. 161), ...I froze on my

seat, felt the skin of my arms melding and becoming one with the cane arms of the chair (p. 194), ...Kambili said her 'amen' loudly (p. 198), Rain splashed across the floor of the verandah, even though the sun blazed... (p. 222), Catholic Hymnal (p. 56).

The indexicals identified above are non-material and intangible things. For instance, from the context, it is revealed that Papa picks up the missal and *flings* it across the room towards Jaja, his son. They are wide apart from each other even though in the same room. This depicts the absence of closeness between Papa and Jaja, though father and son.

Also, 'that' as an index is also symbolic. The use of the noun phrase, 'That girl' by Papa to refer to Sisi, the house girl, robs Sisi of her identity. She is reduced to a mere object, a robot that must be useful to her master. Papa never cherishes any relationship from his immediate family, let alone a maid. This attitude of referring to Sisi as 'that girl' shows some social as well as identity distance, because of the presence of the deictic—'that'. She is not meant to share the table with them since she is not integrated into the household. Papa is determined to keep her at an arm's length as revealed in another incident where he orders, 'Ask that girl to bring more bottled juice' (p. 106). This act can define the social roles of participants in discourse situations and their relationship. This serves as an instance of 'not naming', a face threatening act.

The relationship between Sisi and Papa is an unequal but unhealthy one; one between a social superior and a social inferior, a misfit. He guards against becoming close in any manner. Thus, the use of the distal deixis, 'that girl', indicates a discourse move with distance maintaining function. Kambili and Jaja are not allowed to relate with Sisi either. She is only there as their beast of burden, attending to their needs. The only time Sisi appears before them is to run one errand or the other, bring bottles whose contents she never partakes of. She is a 'work horse' and she is fed to function effectively within the household only (pp. 19, 29, 61, 64, 106).

The conversations that ensue between Sisi and the entire household are instructions. There is no woman-to-woman talk between Sisi and Mama. The only time they talk is when Mama directs her on what to put on fire and when to put it while she sits on an arm chair near the kitchen (p. 18), and maybe, when she tells her to assist her get food poison from her uncle, who is a witch doctor, to poison Papa's tea (p. 294). And it is due to this lack of intimate relationship between Sisi and the entire household that she can afford to get the poison that kills Papa.

In addition, eye contact can indicate interest, attention, and involvement while eye aversion can convey a mixed message to the receiver when used during conversation. Kambili speaks with her eyes on Jaja's face but Jaja determinedly avoids eye contact with her and by extension, avoid the inevitable appeals they bear and which are meant to persuade him, Jaja, to abandon his defiant and confrontational attitude towards Papa. Both Kambili and Jaja understand the message sent by each other through the attempt to make eye contact and the resolve to avoid same (pp. 14, 38, 67, 208, 293). Eye contact and facial expressions provide important social and emotional information. These signs can show positive or negative moods.

From the context, the statement, 'fear having darkened Jaja's eyes to the colour of coal tar' (p. 14) is an ironic indication that the fear of Papa has lost its grip on Jaja. This is made the more evident by his unusual act of looking Papa in the face. Moreover, refusing to move after Papa throws the missal at him suggests not only the absence of fear but also an invitation to Papa to go on and do his worst. His father, Papa, sways from side-to-side. This body movement shows fear, worry, confusion and surprise that he has lost it all in terms of exerting control over his family.

Again, some co-linguistic features identified above are symbolic too. Features like ‘the lowering of Papa’s voice’ – an alternation of softness and amplitude. This makes the conversations natural although in written mode. It could also signal a shift in the speech style of interlocutors to gain acceptance, solidarity, etc. Mama gives order, ‘Nne, ngwa, go and change - in a very low and calm tone’ (p.14). And in the same breath, without pausing, she serves a reminder to Papa, ‘Your tea is getting cold’ (p. 14), and to Jaja, a request, ‘Come and help me *biko*’ (p. 14). This is remarkable. Her breathing mechanism shows her state of rest even in the face of turmoil while the absence of pausing reflects a swing in mood – from a relaxed state to an anxious state. The speed in her speech shows a state of hurry to get things normalized, at least in the meantime, in the home again. She pretends nothing went wrong.

SYMBOLISM IN *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

A symbolic sign or symbol is a sign in which the relation between it and its object is arbitrary. Its connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule and agreement amongst its users. It is almost always culture-bound. Symbols may be general, regional or local in inference or application. The depth of meaning of a symbol is directly proportional to the feeling it engenders in or elicits from the individual or society. Symbols are almost always a comparative evaluation of the same or disparate object or things using the resource of our memory. Symbols deal with assumed meaning and are conventional. A particular symbol may remind people of a particular meaning, that meaning need not be inherent or obvious, in relation to the symbols. Thus, a symbol has no logical meaning between it and the object it refers to. Symbolic signs must be learned, and are unmotivated. Examples of symbols include peace, honesty, love (rose, a shape of heart) symbols, colours, language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, national flags, traffic lights, etc.

Purple Hibiscus is a symbolic novel. Purple hibiscus is a hybrid plant usually found in warm temperate tropical and sub-tropical regions. The title, *Purple Hibiscus*, symbolizes freedom and fulfillment. It stands for the inner voice and strength that the characters seek for. Jaja’s rebellion is thus synonymous with Auntie Ifeoma’s purple hibiscus. It is a clarion call of freedom to which Jaja responds. Jaja’s eyes shone as he brings some purple hibiscus home from Nsukka (p. 97). Purple hibiscus stands for hope that one day, both the hibiscus and the smell of freedom will bloom (p. 253). From the novel, Kambili and Jaja’s visit to their aunt’s house in Nsukka started it all. It is in Auntie Ifeoma’s house that Jaja’s unconscious quest for freedom found expression and free course, triggered by the variety of purple hibiscus (p. 136). Purple hibiscus is a rare breed; theirs is red, ‘...and all the hibiscuses in our front yard were a starling red’ (p. 9).

Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup; a freedom to be, to do. (p.24)

Boldness and demand for freedom is a rare breed both in Eugene's (Papa's) household and in Nigeria in general. Red hibiscus is everywhere, so is docility, servitude and fear. Jaja is resolute in his determination to extricate himself – from the debasing consequences of his father, Papa, while reaching out for the lofty ideals of the later.

The colours of these plants were reddish: the purple plants had started to push out sleepy buds, but most of the flowers were still on the red ones. They seemed to bloom so fast, those red hibiscuses, considering how often Mama cut them to decorate the church altar and how often visitors plucked them.... (p.17)

Papa represents the dominance and unrestrained flourishing of the red hibiscuses while the plucking of their flowers by Mama (Beatrice) is her unconscious but feeble effort at dethroning the overbearing lordship of Papa (Eugene) over her life. Also, the plucking of the red hibiscus flowers 'by mostly Mama's prayer group members' represent their collective effort at assisting Beatrice in her freedom-seeking enterprise. Yanking of the hibiscuses, themselves, 'by the government agents, two men in black jackets', shows the ultimate fate that awaits Papa (Eugene); his death and the manner thereof.

Jaja is an embodiment of the purple hibiscus and like the fragrant flower, he is also about to blossom. The budding flowers, "oval-shaped buds in the front yard as they swayed in the evening breeze" (p. 257), are symbols of new hope and new life. Jaja's transformation from the docile young boy into a determined adolescent was representative of the swift blooming of the 'purple hibiscus plant'; which he nurtured in the compound. Despite Papa's strictness towards his entire household, he could not tame Jaja; could not stop Beatrice from asserting her rights whether through legal or illegal means; and could not stop Kambili from blossoming into a woman who can dish out orders to Mama and to the new driver Mama employed. Jaja's aunt, Aunty Ifeoma, advises him to look after those stalks: '...they will take root only if they are *watered* at regular intervals. Even though the hibiscuses tolerate not *too much water*, they do not prefer dryness either' (p. 204).

In the same vein, Jaja's effort at liberating himself and every member of the family from the stranglehold of his father (Papa) must be done with wisdom, moderation and sense of balance. Later, Jaja informs Aunty Ifeoma that their gardener has planted the 'purple' hibiscus stalks; but that no one is sure that they will survive. This apprehension as to the survival of the purple hibiscus stalks has a direct correlation to the anxiety of everyone as to the probable outcome of Jaja's attempt to cut the domineering and intimidating behavior of his father, Papa, towards his family.

Auntly Ifeoma is central to the liberation struggles of Beatrice and Jaja. This is because quite apart from the psychological verve and fervency her purple hibiscus give to Jaja, she severally encourage them to break the strangulating shackles of her brother, Eugene. She opens Jaja's eyes to the greatness associated with his name, 'I told your mother that it was an appropriate nickname, that you would take after Jaja of Opobo' (p.152). The name, 'Jaja', in the novel is a symbol while 'King Jaja of Opobo' is an icon. She encourages Beatrice, her sister-in-law and Jaja, her nephew, to dominate their worlds, "Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes. Defiance is like marijuana – it is not a bad thing when it is used right" (p.152); "This cannot go on, *nwunye m.* when a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (p. 219). Her later statement above is made when Beatrice, Mama, ran to Nsukka after being beaten up by Papa to the extent she was unconscious and lost her pregnancy. Auntly Ifeoma is the *marijuana* personified. The plucking of the red hibiscus flower by Beatrice and members of her prayer group, and the yanking at the hibiscus plants themselves, by government agents,

are supposed in reality the expressed and active encouragement Aunty Ifeoma offers to Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili.

Papa is the ultimate embodiment of the lordship of the patriarch which relishes in silencing the woman, muffling or muting her voice or browbeating her to remain voiceless. Adichie preaches a message of protest pointing at the unfriendliness, cruelty, brutality of man against the woman. Patriarchy results in sexism which subscribes to the inferiority or even irrelevancy or worthlessness of the female gender.

Women themselves are brain-washed into being willing accomplices to the subjugation and dehumanizing of their sex by sharing in and even propagating of the patriarchal ideology. The female characters – Mama (Beatrice) and Kambili are the most suppressed, silenced, and brutalized, psychologically, emotionally and physically. Others include Aunty Ifeoma, Amaka and Sisi. Papa-Nnukwu's statement, while discussing with his daughter, Aunty Ifeoma, summarises it: "But you are a woman. You do not count" (p. 91). And it is because women do not count, that is why Papa-Nnukwu describes the women's *mmuo* as harmless (weak): 'They do not even go near the big ones (men's *mmuo*) at the festival' (p. 93). The *mmuo* he points to was small. Thus, women are insignificant, meant for decoration/entertainment purposes. To demonstrate the low estate and esteem of the female *mmuo*, and by extension women in general, only little boys followed the female *mmuo*, playing music for her with metal *ogenes* and wooden *ichakas*. On the other hand, 'agwonatumba, the men's *mmuo* is accompanied by elderly men, who ring a shrill bell as the *mmuo* walked'. He also rebuked his grandson, Jaja, on their way to the village square for sight-seeing: "Shh! These are *mmuo*, spirits! Don't speak like a woman!" (p. 93).

Papa is a symbol of hegemonic monster of patriarchy whose mere presence sparks off the fire of danger that keeps women under fear and tension. His high-handedness adversely affects members of his household, which in turn affects their relationship with others. Kambili sounds lachrymal: 'I felt suffocated' (p.7), and at another time burst out, bemused: 'Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours' (p. 96).

The colour, red, is symbolic in the novel. Red stands for the dreadful, for tension: at best, it connotes danger; at worst, it means death. It is a harbinger of discomfort, fear, torture, agony. Red is a symbol used by Adichie to background and foreground the tensed-up, suffocating and tragic atmosphere that haunts and bespeaks Papa's (Eugene Achike) household. Adichie flashes the 'danger colour'—red—wherever she (Kambili) turns her face. The symbol of red is awash, more or less innumerable mentioned in this novel. Also, another colour that is symbolic is black. Yewande, Ade Coker's widow, dresses in black to show she is mourning: '...except for her attire in black wrapper, black blouse, and a black scarf covering all of her hair and most of her fore head' (p. 262).

It is quite unfortunate that Kambili finds no freedom from the danger which red represents. Even in the church, 'The altar is decorated in the same shade of red as Mama's wrapper. Red was the colour of Pentecost. The visiting priest said Mass in red robe...' (p. 28). Papa wears 'red silk pyjamas' (p. 41) most of the time in the house. Papa-Nnukwu bemoans himself having lost his son, Eugene, to the missionaries. When he recalls the complexion of the first priest to

Abba, Fada John whose 'face was red like palm oil...' (p. 84), he might mean that Abba people were uncomfortable with Fada John's complexion which depicts trouble.

The tension, fear, pain, and shock this red signification creates in her forces Kambili into icy silence, which is a symbol too. She could only but stutter. Adichie creates scenes where silence keeps recurring: 'The silence was broken only by the whir of the ceiling fan' (p. 15); '...flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence' (p. 16); 'Our steps on the stairs were as measured and as silent as our Sundays...Even our family time on Sundays was quiet' (p. 31); 'silence hung over the table like the blue-black clouds...' (p. 32). Even Mama (Beatrice), when Papa angrily throws a missal (missile) at Jaja and misses him, but breaks the glass etagere which she, Mama, worships, as a god, she does not complain but only "stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt to pick them up with her bare hands" (p. 16).

Members of Papa's household take not to silence by choice. Their silence is bred by fear. Fear of the god that is Papa. That is why instead of being enraged that the glass etagere, which she is devoted to was broken by Papa, Mama and the children carried on as if nothing at all happened. Jaja, when he is ten, misses two questions on his catechism test and is not named the best in his First Holy Communion class, his father, Papa, gnarled his little finger which became deformed (p. 153). Kambili was beaten for sleeping in the same house with her grandfather (Papa-Nnukwu), and for being in possession of Papa-Nnukwu's painting. Fear ruled their lives. When Jaja heard from Kambili, his sister, that their mother, Mama is pregnant, he intones: 'We will take care of the baby; we will protect him' (p. 31), reflecting Jaja's growing intolerance to his father's authoritarian, totalitarian, whimsical and monstrous treatment of his family, particularly his wife (Mama), is seen in his resolve to fight for everyone's liberation; including the unborn. It is significant that Jaja in the end does not protect the baby from Papa. Kambili, whose name could mean 'Let me live' or 'Allow me to live' actually breathe down, pleads to be allowed to live but fear of Papa would not permit her, would not permit anyone.

Another symbolic event in the novel is the breaking of the figurine. This symbolizes the fragility of the relationship between Papa, on one side, and his family, on the other side. The relationship between the two sides is so fragile that it took only a little spark to shatter, and that spark started from the disobedience of Jaja after a Communion service. An outsider may theorize that the peace of the family has always been under constant threat due to the high-handedness of Papa but for the servile character of Mama, the self-imposed restraints of Jaja and the innocence of Kambili.

The novel opens with a reference to the breaking of the figurines: 'Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere' (p. 11). This symbolizes a crack, an indelible mark that hunted the family of Eugene (Papa) while ushering 'new attitudes'. Mama (Beatrice) eventually gets rid of Papa by poisoning his tea. She insists on not replacing the broken figurines: 'Kpa, I will not replace them' (p. 23), and because of how dangerous Mama considers the broken figurines, she orders Sisi, their house help, to wipe the floor. Her refusal to replace the broken figurines is yet another danger sign that everything is fallen apart. She makes up her mind she will not need them anymore: '...shook her head to show that the figurines did not matter' (p. 18). But Kambili remarks that the figurines mattered in the past,

They did, though. Years ago, before I understood...I would go down to see her standing by the etagere with a kitchen towel soaked in soapy water. She spent at least a quarter of an hour on each ballet-dancing figurines. There were never tears on her face. (pp. 18, 19)

She derives comfort and solace in the figurines as she polishes them after every beating by Papa. It was her way of dealing with the pain. They were her companions then. When the figurines were intact, they represented Mama's submission to and acceptance of Papa's violence. When they were broken, however, the seed of liberation was sown in Mama's subconscious mind. It is also observed that 'her rubber slippers never made a sound on the stairs' (p. 18) whenever she goes to polish them but it did when the figurines broke, 'Then Mama came in, her rubber slippers making *slap-slap* sounds on the marble floor' (p. 15). Rebellion is a foot and nothing will be the same again. Not ever. That is why Mama and Jaja act so normal, 'as if they did not know what had just happened' (p. 16), which surprised 'innocent' Kambili.

Clearly, it was calmness that Mama and Jaja exhibited after the figurines broke. It was not silence. Clearly again, the calmness was not induced by fear but by the absence of it. In speech and in action, they exhibited the assuredness of people that have taken unmistakable total control of their lives. Jaja shows solidarity with his Mother, Mama, as he 'knelt beside Mama, flattened the church bulletin he held into a dustpan, and placed a jagged ceramic piece on it' (p. 16). He rubbishes whatever upheld Papa's ideals. He refers to 'host' as 'wafer' (p. 11), enacting a divergent speech pattern just to threaten his father the more. This, he does to threaten Papa's positive face and publish self-image. And having seen the harm already done on them (himself, Mama and Kambili), he warns his mother, 'Careful, Mama, or those pieces will cut your fingers' (p. 16).

Obviously, the white T-shirt which Mama wore every other day is symbolic but its significance is unfortunately lost on Papa. Papa's religiosity is hollow, with neither substance nor content. At the same time, the expression, 'GOD IS LOVE', on her shirt shows that she is depending on and looking up to God to use His love to save her from the virtual incarceration and loveless stranglehold of her husband. The fundamental attribute of God is love. This is a virtue Papa is bereft of and which Mama preaches to him every other day. Beatrice is sending a subtle message to her husband by her constant wearing of this same T-shirt that love is the fundamental attribute which any man that lays claim to worshipping God must emulate; that the worship of God does not consist in the routine observances of human traditions that the church teach. There is nothing godly in hating or abandoning one's father when one could have used the godly virtue of love to win him over to God. Papa hates his father, Papa-Nnukwu because he is a pagan. So, Beatrice's message is: 'No Love, No God'.

A closer look at Adichie's description of how the missal broke the figurines on the etagere is significant. It shows the inexorable fate of the collapse that awaits Papa's family. A collapse, in fact, destruction that will not respond to any effort to amend it:

It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige, finger-sized ceramic figurines of ballet dancers in various contorted postures to the hard floor and then landed after them. Or rather it landed on their many pieces. (p. 15)

The verbs 'cracked', 'swept', 'contorted' and 'landed' all symbolize violent destruction.

The etagere on which the figurines stand represents the family stage in society. The family is both physically and emotionally broken into pieces like the figurines while the heavy missal

stands for Papa who is the boss of the family. The missal misses Jaja completely and breaks the figurines, which ushers in pain, chaos, and even the death of Papa. It is ironic that the 'huge leather-bound missal that contained the readings for all three cycles of the church year – a prayer book', which is supposed to help Eugene (Papa) live right and order his family aright is what eventually destroys him – his happiness. The missal becomes an agent of destruction, an act which is the opposite of its purpose:

Papa looked around the room quickly, as if searching for proof that something had fallen from the high ceiling, something he had never thought would fall. (p. 15)

Again, the palm frond is a conspicuous symbol in the novel. It symbolizes the triumph of the faithful over his enemy, the devil. It marks the victory of the spirit over the flesh. Palm branches were waved at the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, known as the Triumphant Entry. References in three chapters to 'Palm Sunday' underscore the prominence of the palm in the text. 'Palm Sunday' refers to Jesus Christ triumphant entry. Palm is also a symbol of peace, triumph and tranquility. The 'Palm Sunday' in Christian theology is significant, being the beginning of the victory of good over evil. The 'Palm Sunday', in our text, is also remarkable significant for being the beginning of the end of Papa's household as originally constituted. It marks the beginning of change, a different kind of change that the Eugene's family had never witnessed before.

Fluting of the frond also shows solidarity with a cause and the agitators for the cause, as Kelvin, Papa's driver, sticks the green palm tree branches to the car 'lodged above the number plate, in solidarity in the first week after the coup, so that the demonstrators at Government Square would let us drive past' (p. 35). However, as Kambili notes, 'our branches never looked as bright as the demonstrators' (p. 35) may be indicative that their solidarity to the cause is merely cosmetic, serving only the purpose - securing a right of way.

It is perplexingly ironic that the ideals of the Standard, Papa's newspaper, which is a symbol for all freedoms, and war against societal ills could not be practiced in Papa's home. It is heart-rending that Papa cows his family members to the extent that they speak with their spirit.

Another unmistakable symbol, in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, is the masquerade, 'Agwonatumbe'. Everything about it points to the fact that it is a pagan event. In its combination of such horrific items as human skull, tortoise, snake and dead chickens, the *Agwonatumbe* is much a symbol of everything evil and scary as anything can ever be. It is the fulcrum of Pagan worship quite alright but in real life, Papa who abhors paganism with a passion personifies and symbolizes the *Agwonatumbe*, more so to the members of his immediate family, including his father and sister. Papa-Nnukwu's statement, 'That is our *agwonatumbe*. He is the most powerful *mmuo* and for which Abba was feared' (p.95), with an air of pride and sense of respect, shows acceptance of everything male and patriarchy. It is the same manner that *Agwonatumbe* is idolized that the *umunna*, Abba town, the church hierarchy and laity idolize Papa. He is a threat to the society at large since he criticizes the government through the *Standard*. 'The crowds near the road moved back quickly, fearfully, away from the *agwonatumbe*' (p. 94). Eventually, his powers are defiled by his sister, Aunty Ifeoma, Jaja and Beatrice (Mama), his wife. Kambili, on hearing the death of her father, Papa, intones:

I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal. (pp. 290-291)

Papa, being the most powerful voice through the *Standard* is killed by poisoning. The one that published even underground is discovered, unrobed of his authority, stripped of his power, sapped of his strength as his lifeless body is taken to the hospital for autopsy. He harasses everyone although seen as Christ personified by Father Benedict, who praises him always. Papa is an epitome of 'Religion and Oppression' (p. 179).

On the other hand, the 'earthworm' that appears in Auntie Ifeoma's bathtub (pp. 237, 238, 273, 274), and the 'snail' that crawls out from Mama Joe's basket (pp. 242, 243) are symbolic representations of Kambili who was too slow to catch up with the changes in and around her home. Kambili is the direct opposite of Papa. However, her ridiculous devotion and eagerness to please him is quite annoying. To be fair to her though, it could be seen from her near absence of sorrow over Papa's death that it was fear and not love dictated her attitude towards him. Like the snail, Kambili would slowly crawl out of her imprisoned state. The 'enterprising snail' is seeking freedom, liberation, but there is a superior force produced as the human person imposing her will on the snail, caging it from freedom as it were. Symbolic also are the 'dead rats in a carton, carried by the soldiers' (p. 214), the 'two vultures that hovered overhead and then landed on the ground, close enough that I could have grabbed them...' (p. 249) and Kambili's dreams (pp. 286, 287). They are ominous signs of death that eventually occurred. Furthermore, weather also assumes a symbolic role. After the death of Ade Coker, the editor of the *Standard*, there are heavy rains. The novel ends with the expected arrival of the 'new rains', which is connotative of new hope and positive outcome.

Other symbols in the novel include: the 'Eucharist Fast' (p. 109), the 'host' which represents the body of Christ (p. 14), 'Ash Wednesday' (p. 11), 'Feast of Epiphany' (p. 112), 'Our Father, Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed' (p. 114), 'Act of Contrition, Blessed sacrament' (p. 115), 'Ave Maria' (p. 115), 'Rosaries, Holy water and Scapulars' (p. 279), 'Soutane' (p. 287), etc. These religious items, practices, observances and rituals are mostly identified with the Catholic denomination of the Christian fold.

The sectional titles: BREAKING GODS- PALM SUNDAY, SPEAKING WITH OUR SPIRITS – Before Palm Sunday, THE PIECES OF THE GODS – After Palm Sunday and A DIFFERENT SILENCE – The Present, are all symbols. Before Palm Sunday, they speak with their spirits – they are mute and accept life the way Papa presents same. The Palm Sunday witnesses a turn of events - Jaja's defiance. The elements are let loose after Palm Sunday, then, a different silence at present – Jaja's admission too of having killed his father so as to protect his mother, Mama, Jaja in prison, Auntie Ifeoma's letters to Jaja from the States while he is in jail, Kambili's emotional attachment to Father Amadi who is away in Germany on missionary work....

Poisoning of Papa's tea, by Mama, with rat poison procured by Sisi, the index of inconsequentiality, whom Papa only refers to as 'that girl', points to the power that even the dregs of the society can wield over the mighty. Even Kambili has a rather swift metamorphosis. Her statements; 'The new rains will come down soon' (p. 310), shows hope. She becomes confident and proudly excited that she can frame her world, 'I can talk about the future now' (p. 310), are indexes breaking of the bands of fear and silence.

Mama, before Papa's death, could only respond to crises by crying and remaining calm. Mama does not stand up to or challenge Papa's violence against her, but she takes action that speaks the loudest. Mama's (Beatrice) attitude immediately after the death of Papa, her husband,

approximates her stern decision not to replace her beloved figurines earlier broken by Papa. She shows she has become her own woman, her own person, taking charge of her life:

The compound gates were locked. Mama had told Adamu not to open the gates to all the people who wanted to throng in for *Mgbalu*, to commiserate with us.

Even members of our *umunna* who had come from Abba were turned away...Mama told him we wished to mourn privately, that they could go to offer Masses for the repose of Papa's soul. (pp. 292-293)

Mama does not allow Kambili, her daughter, to sympathize with her when her figurines break. That is why she tells her it does not matter. Now also, on the death of Papa, she wants no sympathy. Jaja keeps a straight face and blank eyes on hearing the news of Papa's death. It is only Sisi, their house help, that cries: '...loud sobs that had quickly quieted in the face of our bewildered silence' (p. 293). The absence of wailing and tears, in the face of tragedy, is a deafening index of lack of sorrow and mourning, in contemporary Igbo society.

SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF NEGLIGENCE OF IDENTIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION OF SIGNS

From the fore-going discussion, it is obvious that the character, Papa, could not detect the danger signs, the red flag his household was brandishing until he is consumed in death. His aggressive malhandling of them, beginning with Mama, his wife, to the children led them to seek for freedom; Jaja refuses to attend holy communion in church and gives flimsy excuse; Kambili holds tight Papa-Nnukwu's paintings she got from Nsukka as they visits her aunt, Auntie Ifeoma, as Papa beats her and Mama poisons Papa. In trying to inculcate moral discipline and right social values into his children, Papa loses them through external influence from close relations, religious leaders like Father Amadi who opened Kambili's eyes to love.

CONCLUSION

Communication relies on using something to represent something else (Saeed, 2009, p. 108; O'Grady et al. 2011, p. 551). An understanding of signs is essential for understanding how messages are transmitted. From the above research paper, the novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, by Chimamanda Adichie is better understood through reading and interpreting both the verbal and non-verbal signs. Fictional works are translated into reality when we decode the signs in them. And when signs in books are decoded, they can help fix 'a floating chain' of signifieds, according to Roland Barthes (cited in Frank, 1983, p. 3). Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is rich in icons, indexes and symbols. We were able to identify some icons and indexes as symbols too. These signs identified in the novel are images of something used to illustrate and support the meanings and information provided by the text.

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