

**Cultural Violation Crimes and Punishment in Abani's  
*Graceland and Adichie's Purple Hibiscus***

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**Abstract**

Culture is the custom and social behaviour of a given community. Without culture man will have no control and will not be different from animals, and anarchy is inevitable. In order to avoid such, the rules of behaviour are obeyed by all and violation is visited with punishment. Besides the physical sanction exacted on offenders, the Igbos also believe in supernatural punishment of offenders. This is a situation when supernatural forces, also known as gods, avenge the transgressor. This usually happens when the offender is adamant to warnings. Supernatural punishment can manifest in diverse forms of misfortunes such as: death, madness, sickness, losses and so on. When this happens, people will conclude that the gods are afflicting the person or that the hands of the gods dealing with him/her. This essay focuses on cultural violation crimes and punishments in Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). It adopts Toni Morrison's principle of "Ancestral Presence" and Irving Zietlin's concepts of

"Crime and Punishment" to explore instances of cultural transgressions and sanctions in these two texts. It concludes that these two Igbo novelists promote Igbo cultural wholesomeness and preservation by their endorsement of punishments of its violators.

**Keywords:** Cultural violation, punishment, Igbos, novels

**Introduction**

The Igbos have a world view and culture that tilt towards egalitarianism. The community is bound by cultural rules the violation of which attracts some punishment for the offender. They place premium on peace and order and recognise the importance of punishment in forestalling human viciousness, abuse and anarchy by powerful individuals. "As humans, our behaviors are guided in part by a set of social norms about morality that forms a basic part of our culture" (Maricopa.edu, n.p). Though the society has evolved into a modern one, the Igbo cultural morality remains etched in their social conducts such that when it is subverted, punishment is administered to the offender.

Being a superstitious society, sanction is administered physically and supernaturally. Apart from physical punishment such as: exaction of fine, banishment, ex-communication (Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*), the Igbos believe that invisible beings known as gods also avenge acts of cultural violation, especially if the offender appears to be powerful, recalcitrant and heedless to warnings. In such cases, the aggrieved will seek vengeance from the gods by handing over such offender to the gods for exaction of punishment.: (Papa Nnukwu reports Eugene to the gods/ancestors in his daily morning prayers/*ofo*, for his apathy and callousness towards him *Purple Hibiscus*, 69-70).

Culture has to do with the belief and world view of a

people and its violation is a grievous crime among the Igbos. Crime and punishment are terms that have attracted several definitions from different fields of study. According to *Black's Law Dictionary*, a crime is “[...] any act done in violation of those duties which an individual owes to the community, and for the breach of which the law has provided that the offender shall make satisfaction to the public” (370). Law here refers to the unwritten law which is the rule that governs human behaviour among them.

The Sociological scholar, Irving Zeitlin, sees crimes as acts that “are universally disapproved of by members of the society in question [because they] shock the collective conscience. A crime, therefore, is an act which antagonizes the powerful and well-defined sentiments of a collectivity” (304). He defines punishment as “a powerful reaction against the offender, a form of vengeance which... enables the society to heal the wound inflicted upon it by the offender, restore its moral integrity and reaffirm its most fundamental values”(304).

What arises from the foregoing is that the act of cultural violation is an infraction against the community and its members and must elicit some punishment. It is pertinent to note that what one society may consider as a crime may not be so regarded by another society. This brings us to the questions of cultural diversities or differences. For instance, in India, the act of self-immolation or setting oneself on fire to constitute what is known as a funeral pyre by the widow on the death of her husband, is neither regarded as a crime nor an offence in that society. Similarly, whereas a Yoruba man will regard it as disrespect when a younger person greets him without prostrating or genuflecting, an Igbo man will not be bothered about that because of their cultural differences. Our focus in this essay is on the Igbo speaking people of Nigeria

### **Ancestral Presence, Cultural Violation and Punishment**

The African-American writer, Toni Morrison, makes a pertinent observation that applies to the examination of cultural violation and the punishment it portends for offenders. She identifies in the works of African and African-American writers the presence of what she calls the ancestors. She notes that these ancestors do not have to be only the biological parents of the characters but also some elderly people whose relationship with the characters helps the latter in several beneficial ways such as offering them protection, instruction, wisdom among others. Morrison posits that a character's attempt to rebel against this kind of nurturing and benevolent relationship between him/her and the ancestors spells the doom, destruction and negative end of such a character while the one that enters into such relationships always succeeds (“Rootedness, The Ancestors as Foundations...” 343).

According to her, relationship with the ancestors is a continuum the severance of which portends death and danger for any character in African and African-American authored works. This observation is true about the Igbo and most African cultures. Morrison submits: “... it seems to me interesting to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of an ancestor, which is to say, grandfather [...], or grandmother [...], or a healer [...] There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, productive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Furthering her argument, she submits:

What struck us in looking at some contemporary fiction was that whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or the happiness of the character. It was the

absence of an ancestor that was frightening [...and] threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray [...], it seemed to be one of those interesting aspects of the continuum in Black or African American art [...](343).

A close reading of Abani's *Graceland* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* brings Morrison's submission home as it points us to characters who invoke destruction upon themselves by their failure to contract relationships with these elderly people for which reason they lose the wisdom, counsel, protection and instruction that accrue from them to guarantee their safety and fortune. Consequently, they transgress against their cultural values and freely walk into their doom. This argument gets clearer as the discourse unfolds.

### Critical Receptions on the Novels

Some scholars have offered critical insights into these texts. In his interrogation of *Graceland*, Benjamin Ohwovoriole dwells on the structure and characterisation, perceiving them as metaphors of neurological disorder. He identifies several medical neurological disorders such as: epilepsy, muscular dystrophy, Alzheimer's disease and so on, and equates these medical abnormalities with the condition of the Nigerian nation and her people. He postulates: "Basically, Chris Abani depicts Nigeria as a character with neurological flaws. Her children, the imaginary citizens that are the other characters that populate the text inherit some of these nervous system disease" (116). This critic aptly describes the graphic socio-political disorder in this work. Sita Maria Kattanek is concerned about the high violence content of the novel and its effect on Elvis, the young protagonist. Kattanek decries the humiliation and "degradation that Elvis experiences...", and laments the general lack, poverty, hunger,

corruption and exploitation that define the political regime of the time (428). On her part, Army Novak compares the human part hunt, commodification and the exploitative tendencies of the military to the era of slave trade and identifies the only difference between the two methods of dehumanisation to be the slight transformation of the style of operation of the version in *Graceland*. Novak notices "no end to colonialism" and asserts that it is "only a transformation of US and Europe policies and methods" that constitutes such difference. According to her, "conquest and slavery are replaced by the creation of a market" (35).

For Heater Hewett, Abani does not concern himself with the usual practice of blaming outsiders for Africa's socio-political predicament. In her view, this novel obviously does not write back to the Empire in the classic fashion of postcolonial textualities". But instead it dwells "[...] on Nigeria as a cultural, transitional and hybridised space [...]" (22). Hewett's observation points to the conclusion that *Graceland* locates the cause of Africa's political maladministration within the continent itself and not in external forces. John Hawley not only includes *Graceland* among the African works that recount the Biafran war but also focuses attention on the telling consequences of violence on children (22). The critic is irked by the depth of violence which wars can wrought on a child's psyche and life after his juxtaposition of *Graceland* with other literary works on similar subject. The above observations about the novel are apt and insightful. However, they seem to be silent on the crime of cultural transgression and the sanctions attracted by the offenders, an aspect undertaken by this paper.

Some critics have also expressed their views on *Purple Hibiscus* from different perspectives. In his view, Kingsley Ugwuanyi believes that Eugene is not different from the colonisers who came to Africa for colonialism agenda under the pretext of evangelism. He considers Eugene to be a religious

fanatic with warped Western mentality, noting that he exploits the white/saintly and black/devilish paradigms to privilege Western culture above the African culture which he demonises in much the same way as he demonises his father. Ugwuanyi condemns him as a hypocrite who is deluded by religious fundamentalism (38). In her essay, "Narrating the Past...", Louisa Egbunike addresses the text from the oral-historical perspective. She places the freedom fighting acts of Jaja side by side those of his historical namesake, Jaja of Opobo, and notes that Adichie's Jaja recognises that "in any liberation movement there will be casualties" (27). Egbunike's concern here is about the repetition of history as portrayed in the relationships between the historical Jaja and his literary double both of whom prefer casualty-ridden liberation struggle to repression. Jane Duran considers Adichie's representation of plausible characters as a rare feat and opines: "This feat is all the more noteworthy as the author refuses to indulge in platitudes; rather, she provides us with characters whose credibility is underscored by both their strengths and weaknesses" (45-6). Edgar Nabutanyi examines the relationship of Eugene with his household, and accuses him of "...ritualized abuse of his family..." (73), while Iniobong Uko wonders what will "...make a mother [Beatrice/Mama] the bearer and nurturer of life, to be the one that terminates life" (57). Ahmed Maiwada debunks what he views as false critical claims concerning the source of the novel. In "Purple Hibiscus, Adichie's Debt to Achebe?" he challenges the submissions of Lamikanra and Osofisan both of which he states, establish the existence of parallels between *Purple Hibiscus* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (n.p).

Niyi Osunbade interrogates it from a discourse analytical angle and observes that Eugene's claim to moral standard as seen in his editorial crusades against the tyrannical political regime of the time is only hypocritical. He advances Eugene's family life as the justification of his position and Osunbade avers that: "[...] his

private life is as dictatorial and [as] abusive as the leaders whom he attacks" (140). Ogaga Okuyade empathises with Eugene's immediate family members she recognises as the regular sites of his assaults, noting that he turns them to midgets and tosses them to any direction he chooses as a result of his religious bigotry (n.p). Lawal Olusola and Lawal Alabi occupy themselves with the mental and psychic torture to which Eugene subjects his family and conclude that this household lives "on [an] edge, walking on eggshells and sitting on a time-bomb, never knowing when he might snap and explode" (9).

In an essay, Tshilidzi Marwala opines that the 2020 compulsory lockdown necessitated by Covid-19 brought men's violence against women to the fore. This is a very apt observation as violence against women is evident in our focal novels. This scholar recounts five female victims of femicide in South African society and posits: "As Africans face an invisible threat in the way of the coronavirus, our women face another perennial enemy-violence at the hands of men" (n.p). Marwala's observation about the violence to which these South African women are subjected coheres with Beatrice's situation in *Purple Hibiscus*. It is pertinent to note that none of these critics explores the issue of cultural transgression and sanction in *Purple Hibiscus*. Consequently, we have elected to fill this gap and contribute to knowledge.

### **Instances of Cultural Violation and Punishment in the Novels**

An exploration of *Graceland* reveals instances of acts that border on violation of Igbo cultural values. The Igbos believe that a child has the responsibility of taking care of his father/parents when he is grown and established as reflected in the proverb: "Nna zusia nwa, nwa azuba nna". This presupposes that the father first owes his child the duty of care and nurture till the child grows to start catering for his father in the latter's old age in return. Mr. Sunday Oke, the father of Elvis, the novel's protagonist, violates

this cultural stipulation as he abandons Elvis at eight to fend for himself. His abdication of his paternal duties exposes Elvis to societal danger, abuse and neglect as he has to rent his own apartment and fend for himself at the tender age of eight. He dances at the Bar Beach disguised as Elvis Priestley and does other unconscionable things to eke out a living. For instance, Elvis wraps cocaine with Redemption (another character), conveys human parts for the Colonel; patronises night clubs where he is rented by rich prostitutes and makes friends with the society's miscreants (76). Consequently, he has no option than to renounce his family and embrace the alternative world of social vice offered him by Redemption (131-132). Finding no succor in his family, Elvis disowns it for the family and world provided by Redemption (188-189). Though this may not be a perfect alternative but at least it helps Elvis to put food in his stomach and raiment on his body unlike his father that abandons him to his fate in a wild city such as Lagos.

Mr. Oke is married to Beatrice, who few years after giving birth to their son Elvis, falls ill with breast cancer. Mr. Oke denies her care and even the pleasure of listening to music which she does to assuage her excruciating pains. Regularly, he insults and disrespects his mother-in-law, Oye who moves into the house to nurse Beatrice, her sick daughter. Mr. Oke would yank the needle off the record thereby preventing his sick wife from enjoying the comforting music. He would also assault her mentally, psychically and emotionally by reminding her of how close she is to her death, having exhausted all her chemotherapy sessions: "The sicker Beatrice got, the more often she held ... impromptu little music-and-dance sessions. There were soda and cookies and smoked meat on the table[...] Then Sunday stopped by the Veranda. He stepped by the record player and yanked the needle off the record [...] "What is wrong with you people? What are you celebrating, your death?" (42-43).

Mr. Oke extends the same psychological torture to Beatrice's mother (Oye) who comes to nurse her ailing daughter. When Oye tries to call her son-in-law to order for his abnormal and unnatural behaviour, he retorts: "Shut up, witch, I am not afraid of you. When Oye reminds him of the need to mind his language because of the presence of some children around, the authorial voice reveals that, "He looked at her and raised his hand to strike her. It hang in the air between them as if he couldn't remember what he meant to do with it. With a sigh, he wiped his face" (43).

Mr. Oke's treatment of his sick wife and visiting mother-in-law respectively contravenes the Igbo principles of nurturance and honour. The Igbos believe in caring for the sick and according honour and respect to one's in-law and elder. Apart from the fact that Oye is his mother-in-law, she is also much older than him. Besides, her presence in his home is more of service than for pleasure. It is an unthinkable offence among the Igbos to assault one's in-law and elder because they are revered as helpers and alternative parents. No wonder Mr. Oke's hand gets hanged in the air when he tries to strike Oye. This and other actions of his arouse the vengeance of the gods who visit him with death for violating the codes of human relationship.

For abdicating his filial duties towards Elvis, the only product of his marriage after Beatrice's death; for withholding love and care from his sick wife, and for dishonouring and insulting Oye, an in-law and elder, Mr. Oke invites supernatural punishment upon himself. The military regime gives a quit notice to the occupants of the premises in Maroko slum where Mr. Oke resides. All the tenants in the apartment quit except him. He remains adamant in the face of the demolition exercise even when the bulldozer driver and other workers warn him of the coming danger. He refuses to budge. Two supernatural presences: Beatrice's ghost and a totem, a talking leopard also appear to warn

him to leave for his life but he heeds none.

Thus, the bulldozer sends “its metal blades cracking his chest like a timber box as it went into the wall of his home” (286, 287). Mr. Oke's case depicts the danger in cutting off from the ancestors or refusing to establish relationships with them as Morrison observes in the preceding pages. Because he lacks such a flow with the ancestors represented by Oye and the supernatural presences, he is unable to recognise or discern their presence when they appear before him in the form of a totem and a talking leopard to issue him the danger warning. Consequently, he trades words with them, challenging them and boasting that they are the ones to die and not him and finally ends up in the metal blades of the bulldozer (286-287). As a result of his crime of transgressing against his cultural values such as: abandoning his son and heir, abusing his sick and helpless wife and insulting an elder and his mother-in-law, the gods give approval for his total destruction. They make him oblivious of the danger of the bulldozer and make him die off as punishment for his crimes.

There are also instances of cultural violation in *Purple Hibiscus*. Eugene/Papaviolates his people's cultural values in his dealings with some characters. Though a wealthy only son, he willfully abdicates filial obligations of care towards his poor widowed father, Papa Nnukwu. Besides denying him affection and upkeep, he forbids him from visiting his home and relating with his children. He creates a gulf-like contrast between his affluence and the penury that defines his father's existence, hinging his action on Papa Nnukwu's refusal to accept the white man's religion. In moments of extreme deprivation, the old man travels from his Abba home to Nsukka, to get momentary nurturance and care from his daughter Ifeoma, who manages with her two children on a meagre salary.

Overwhelmed by his son's contemptuous and despicable treatment, Papa Nnukwu laments hurtfully: “*Nekeem* [...] my son owns that house that can fit in everyone in Abba [their village], and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate” (83). By these acts of commission and omission, Eugene breaks the bonds of filial relationship as reflected in the Igbo maxims: “Nna zusia nwa, nwa azuba nna” and “Nwa bu ndo” respectively interpreted: “A child inherits the burden of caring and nurturing the father when he is established” and “Offspring is a shield”. The Igbos believe that children are their parents' hope of security, strength, care and nurture in their old and feeble age.

It becomes shameful when a parent is blessed with children and still suffers in his/her old age the way Papa Nnukwu does. In Igbo society, this kind of attitude incurs the displeasure of both the parent of such an irresponsible and insensitive son and the entire community. This instant case is even worse because Papa Nnukwu is a lonely widower. By reneging on what is rightly his duties towards his father, Eugene betrays himself as a bastard and not a son. Eugene metes similar treatment to Pa Anikwenwa when he visits the village for Christmas. He bars Anikwenwa from entering his house for the same reason that Anikwenwa is not a Christian. This octogenarian is irked by such disrespectful behaviour and retorts: “Do you know that I am in your father's age group, *gbo*?” With a wounded heart, he prophetically pronounces some doom on Eugene: “*Ifukwagi!* You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave” (69-70). Eugene loses the benefits he would have derived from contracting relationships with these ancestors exemplified in Papa Nnukwu and Pa Anikwenwa, thereby invoking “frightening threat” upon himself. By rebelling against such ancestral presence, he pitches his destiny with “destruction and disarray”, in the light of Morrison's framework of ancestral presence.

Among the Igbos, a child belongs to the entire community and anyone old enough to sire him/her is regarded as the parent whose blessings and curses have potent effect on that child. Such pronouncements are even more potent when they issue from elders and grey-haired ones who are believed to co-exist with the gods and ancestors in the same realm. Similarly, the prayers and wishes of one's biological parents have mysterious accuracy and potency on the offspring. Eugene's crime of paternal contempt, neglect and rejection make Papa Nnukwu to seek vengeance in the gods and ancestors against his obstinate son in his morning *ofo* (prayer) routines: "*Chineke!* Those who wish others well, keep them well. Those who wish others ill, keep them ill" [But for his caring daughter, Ifeoma, he prays] "My spirit will intercede for you [...] when I join my ancestors" (166, 83). A widower such as Papa Nnukwu with a wealthy son like Eugene is not supposed to subsist the way he is left to do and this wounds him deeply. Thus, his pain is rolled up in his intercessory prayer and resignation to the ancestors, who are sharing in the realm of gods, to avenge for him.

Eugene's cultural violation extends to his wife, Beatrice and children: Kambili and Jaja, for all of whom he embodies a monster and molester. As a patriarchal society, the culture may not frown at him for always beating his wife and children without provocation but it holds him accountable for the crime of murder. There are incidents of his targeting Beatrice when battering her in such a way as to make her have a miscarriage even when he knows that she is desirous of having more children. One of such incidents as relayed by Kambili in this hair-raising excerpt suffices:

[...] I heard the door open. Papa's gait on the stairs, sounded heavier, more awkward than usual. We stood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute sack

of rice [...] we cleaned up the trickle of blood, which trailed away as if someone had carried a leaking jar of water colour all the way downstairs (32-33).

Beatrice loses the pregnancy and is hospitalised for some days. To underscore the enormity of the loss and her devastation, the authorial voice captures her mood: "Her eyes were vacant, like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dump" [...] "There was an accident, the baby is gone, she said" (34).

Going by Eugene's crimes, the gods approve that he should exit the scene through death. When she can no longer bear his tyranny and brutality, Beatrice procures some poison to eliminate him. As a proof that the gods are in agreement, even when she confesses to the crime the police are unwilling to prosecute her which is quite unlike the case in Igbo society. If his death is not a punishment from the gods, Beatrice will be made to pass through grievous ordeals in the hands of the *umuada*, especially when she confesses to the crime. But the gods close everyone's mind and exact punishment on Eugene for dishonouring his father and murdering his unborn children whose miscarriages he provokes. For rebelling against the ancestral presence by refusing to cultivate relationships with Papa Nnukwu and Pa Anikwenwa, Eugene's doom is determined from the onset. Consequently, Pa Anikwenwa's prophecy comes through because in the Igbo worldview, parental neglect incurs sanctions from the gods and finds expression in the Igbo proverb: "*Nwata tulie nna ya elu, ogo do nna ya ayochie ya anya*," meaning that a child who dishonours his father invites destruction upon itself.

## Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the Igbo society places much premium on honour and respect for parents and the elderly and on the execution of responsibilities towards one's children and close family members. Murder, disrespect, duty abdication and other unconscionable behaviours are acts of cultural violation, which are punishable by the gods. Maintaining a close relationship with elderly people confers some wisdom that is useful for successful existence and people who shun this usually end badly. These are evident in the fates of Mr. Sunday Oke and Eugene Achike in *Graceland* and *Purple Hibiscus*, respectively.

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