RE-READING EUGENE ACHIKE IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*: A MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract
In many discourses, Eugene Achike in Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus has been blamed for his high handedness and the ensuing misfortunes that befell his family. However, no view has actually considered Eugene as a victim; therefore, the narrative regarding his character has been lopsided. This paper therefore, utilizing the content analysis methodology, contends that Eugene is a patient of a mental health disorder that makes him a casualty as well in the saga concerning his family. The paper advocates for an unrelenting effort towards the awareness-raising campaigns for various types of mental health challenges. It is equally hoped that through this work, people will learn not to be too quick in judging others.

Introduction
In many articles, especially those related with gender discourse, Eugene Achike has been demonized. He has been blamed for his high-handedness and unbending rigidity in running the affairs of his family. From themes drawn from the text revolving mostly around domestic violence and oppression, he has been castigated for all the misfortunes that befell his wife and children. He is seen as a proto-type of a patriarchal overlord, demanding unquestioned submission from the females around him and oftentimes, physically manhandling them into compliance. For instance, Ngozi Chuma-Udeh (2011) contends that he is, '... cruel, overbearing and highhanded' and that, '... he bears down with an iron hand on his

family ... he is too eager to reprimand at the least consideration of daring to his authority' (p. 264-65). Similarly, Margaret Nutsukpo (2017) alleged that gender based violence and domination of the woman portrayed in the text is apparent through the domestic violence projected through Eugene Achike's character.

On the other hand, attempting to steer the boat from widely accepted feminist based interpretations, a deconstructionist view by Onyinye Mary Jane Okpala (2020), speaking for Eugene posits that, 'It does appear that what readers think of the violence and its performer in *Purple Hibiscus* is shaped and influenced by the external ubiquitous knowledge that violence is maniacal and only done with sadistic motives...' (p. 1). In light of this view, Okpala argues for Eugene, contending that readers relate negatively to his character because they come from the position that violence is done only with a motive that is callous. Likewise, another view by Eyo Etim and Ima Usen Emmanuel (2015) argues that Eugene Achike; 'one of the central characters in the text, [should be] seen as an epitome of a hero; a principled protagonist who is murdered for being unwavering in his beliefs' (p. 13). By means of several illustrations, they attempted to shift focus from Kambili to her father; Eugene as the protagonist of the text and as 'an ideal hero – a patriot and caring parent' (p. 21).

Based on the foregoing, it is deduced that Eugene Achike has been spoken for and spoken against in the corpus of critical views and elucidations on *Purple Hibiscus*. In essence, he has been dissected along two disparate perspectives. On one hand, he has been portrayed as a villain and on the other, a hero. However, a reconsideration of his character portraiture in the text reveals a middle ground that views him as a victim. His behavioural pattern and conduct in the text is indicative of a mental health concern. In Nigeria, although that the general attitude towards mental health is still not one to be desired, Stephen Kekeghe (2020) observes that, 'literature has, over the years, maintained a good status as a potent instrument in medical education' and that, 'narratological strategies have been effectively deployed in conveying mental illnesses through literature' (p. 326). This is because, according to

him, 'the response to the socio-cultural surroundings is a major obligation of the writer, especially, in the African context where social consciousness and commitments are the drivers of literary productions' (p. 325). As such, even though Adichie's major thematic concern in *Purple Hibiscus* is unrelated to 'madness', yet, it foregrounds features of a mental health issue that manifests in the conducts of Eugene Achike. Moreover, in the depiction of Eugene's condition, Adichie equally points the reader to the social trigger that births his mental health state, for according to Kekeghe, 'writers' effort to narrate the inward quality of characters, in relation to socioeconomic experiences, is psychologically realistic – an individual's inner life manifests in his/ her conduct and social motivations' (p. 327).

Eugene Achike: A mental health perspective

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie depicts a mental health concern that is generated by the need to maintain appearances. Mirroring the individual, the society and the home, she foregrounds how Eugene's yearning to be perfect as an individual and to be thought perfect by the society triggers an incessant obsession with control, rigidity and order that cracks his home. His maniac pre-occupation with control, order and perfection takes root from a deeply ingrained pattern of a biased upbringing by colonial catholic priests, to whom nothing about Africa is perfect. Ludovic Lado (n.d) contends that... in the nineteenth century, Christianity reached black Africa as part of the Western campaign of 'civilisation' meant to 'redeem' the 'dark continent' from the claws of ignorance and devilish superstition. The heroic commitment of Christian missionaries, not only to the preaching of the gospel but also to the implantation of schools and hospitals, was part of this general programme of elevating the 'primitive' African to the level of the 'civilised' Westerner ... The missionary had come to give and not to receive; Africans had nothing to give but everything to receive. Just as civilisation meant substituting Western cultures for African cultures, evangelization came to mean replacing African religions with Christianity. Overzealous missionaries even destroyed

traditional ritual places in an attempt to persuade the evangelized that their old ways were worthless ... (p. 9)

With this state of affairs, missionary priests strove to mould the African into an image of Christian perfection that fitted into the western paradigm. As encapsulated in the character of Father Benedict in *Purple Hibiscus*, these priests are often judgmental, critical, rigid and unbending in recognizing and dealing with human fallibility. Consequently, the individual that is brought up by these priests is often riddled with inferiority complex, low self esteem and a constant inner struggle to measure up to expectations. Thus, with these imperfections often at par with societal expectations, it generates a state of intrapersonal conflict that manifests in aggressiveness. For instance, Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* narrated an experience; I committed a sin against my own body once ... and the good father, the one I lived with ... He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured the water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it... the good father did that for my own good (p. 194).

From the above, juxtaposing the impact of pain on Eugene's scalded hands and his willing acceptance of the excessive punishment, portrays a character that have been made to believe that there is nothing good about him and for him to attain perfection, there must be an infliction of a grievous mortal chastisement. Therefore, this rigidly moralistic environment and a constant internalizing of these maladaptive situations from his childhood, becomes a catalyst for a post traumatic stress disorder, as such that, the man Eugene grew into becomes unduly obsessed with inflexibility, perfection and control.

In the text, Eugene Achike is a wealthy industrialist who uses his wealth to support many charitable enterprises. He is a devout catholic and a '... representation of civic qualities, dedicated to disparaging the excesses of the military government in Nigeria' (Chuma-Udeh, 2011, p. 264). Outside his home, he is adored, respected and admired. He does all that is expected of him and built into him by the catholic priests that fostered him. He makes the '... biggest donations to Peter's pence and St. Vincent de Paul ... [pays] for the cartons of communion wine, for the new ovens at

the convent where the Reverend Sisters baked the host, for the new wing to St. Agnes Hospital where Father Benedict gave extreme unction' (5). He sits in the front pew always, is the first to receive communion and helps to distribute ash on ash Wednesday with his line moving, '...the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb ...meaningfully [enunciating] every word of dust and unto dust you shall return' (p. 3).

His obsession with conformity with his colonial religious and catholic heritage makes him change 'his accent when he spoke, sounding British, just as he did when he spoke to Father Benedict ...' (p. 46). It makes him not want his children to be associated with the Igbo language in public lest he be thought archaic and a heathen. He expects them to speak English, and to '...sound civilized in public' (p. 13). Eugene is a perfect disciple, reporting '...to Father Benedict, with concern, when a person missed communion on two successive Sundays. He will always encourage Father Benedict to call and win that person back to the fold ...' (p. 6). After service, he is expected to project an image of humility by '...shaking hands with the men, hugging the women, patting the toddlers and tugging at the babies' cheeks' (p. 29).

Father Benedict often says to his congregation; Look at Brother Eugene. He could have chosen to be like other big men in this country, he could have decided to sit at home and do nothing after the coup ... Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom. How many of us have stood up for the truth? How many of us have reflected the triumphant entry? (p. 5)

Ade Coker, his editor at *The Standard* insists that he is always too modest and venerates him as 'a man of integrity, the bravest man I know' (p. 42). Answering to his title, Omelora, he makes certain that no one leaves his compound in the village empty handed, as such; his umunna takes sides with him against his father that he considers a heathen. However, what is discernible from this glowing massaging of ego is a subtle reminder of expectations and obligations that constantly nag at the depths of Eugene's being, seeking to make him always conscious

of the fact that he has to please people and to ensure that they are pleased with him. For Eugene, this repressed desire to be accepted by people unmasks the profundity of his inferiority complex and personal insecurities, which is at par with the external projection of himself. Altering his accent when he speaks and always being solicitous in an 'eager-to-please' manner, especially with the 'white religious' reveals a man riddled with low self esteem.

Eugene's excessive preoccupation with perfectionism suggests a case of obsessive – compulsive personality disorder. OCPD, as it is commonly referred to, is defined by The American Psychiatric Association (2013) as a mental health issue that is typified by a pattern of persistent fixation with orderliness, perfection, control, rules and pattern that significantly impairs the individual's interpersonal relationships. OCPD is a category of mental ill health under personality disorders as its broad umbrella. Its origin has often been linked to traumatic experiences or situations, dysfunctional homes, parenting and upbringing styles, environmental influences and social conditions. According to Benjamin Olley (2005), persons experiencing OCPD deal with, 'personal insecurity, doubt and incompleteness, leading to excessive conscientiousness, checking, stubbornness and caution' as such that there is, 'perfectionism and meticulous accuracy and a need to check repeatedly in an attempt to ensure this' (p. 329).

In Eugene's case, his perfectionist expectations of himself bear down on his family. He becomes unbendingly rigid in seeking perfection and conformity from every member of his family. He tells his daughter, 'You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it' (p. 192). The irony here is that this sin Kambili committed is seeking a relationship with her grandfather, who is a part of the family even though his son, Eugene shuts him out because he has a different religious inclination. Among the Igbo, there is a great value placed on the family and family in the Igbo-African context often includes extended families, of which the elderly and grandparents are involved. Uzoma Okoye in a paper presented in an 'Healthy Aging' conference in 1999, posits that 'In traditional Igbo

communities, care of the elderly within the extended family ...was engrained in the culture ... for many elderly people ... it was culturally imperative for children to support and respect the elderly' (p. 4). Against this background, one can see that Kambili committed a sin in reaching out to her grandfather only because her father views it so. Eugene disrespects his father by adamantly labelling him 'heathen' and therefore alienating himself and his immediate family from him. He equally shoves Anikwena; an elder, out of his house in Abba for being 'a worshipper of idols'. This reveals an ingrained innate nature of non-acceptance of others who do not share the same beliefs with him. Aligning with his inability to understand other people, he is invariably telling his elderly father, 'it is either my own way or nothing else'. Ironically again, Eugene sees nothing wrong in his actions, for as it is with people with personality disorders, they consider their behaviour normal and puts the blame on others for what they face or are going through. Thus, instead of feeling sorry on his father's demise, Eugene says, 'He has gone to face judgement ... He might have converted before he died' (p. 188). Continuing in his blame game, he lashes at his children, '... Is that what you have learned from living in the same house as a heathen?' (p. 188). To Aunty Ifeoma, with no tears in his eyes, he asks, 'Did you call a priest to give him extreme unction?' (p. 186). In essence, Eugene blamed his father, not for dying, but for not dying Catholic.

As for Kambili, she is not expected to take the second position in school, while Chinwe Jideze takes the first. Although that taking second position means scoring high in examinations as well, Eugene would not have that. For him, second best is no best. With Jaja, not considering that it is his first class and that in subsequent classes, he might do better, the narrator notes that because he was not named the best in his first Holy Communion class, 'Papa took him upstairs and locked the door. Jaja, in tears, came out supporting his left hand with his right,' (p. 144). His fixation with order and control manifests in the precision with which he administers schedules for his family. Jaja and Kambili's were always meticulously drawn to perfection in 'black ink, cut

across each day, separating study from siesta ...eating from prayer, prayer from sleep' (p. 24). He always holds the key to their rooms, insisting that the doors remain unlatched. Even though that in a typical Nigerian household, domestic affairs like keys to doors are within the jurisdiction of the wife/mother, Eugene shows no respect to his wife because he is a control freak.

In the same vein, obsessed with pattern, their house was always silent, 'the silence of waiting until Papa was done with his siesta so we could have lunch . . . the silence of reflection time, when Papa gave us a scripture passage . . .the silence of evening rosary; the silence of driving to the church for benediction afterwards...' (p. 31). On account of his inflexibility, he makes no room for understanding the intricacies of pregnancy that Beatrice faced when she begged to stay in the car instead of going to visit Father Benedict as his instituted custom for his family every Sunday is. His over zealousness with matters of religiosity creates no room for in-betweens when Kambili had to eat a little cereal to take a drug before Sunday mass. His extreme fastidiousness with pattern and rules makes him consider Father Amadi; the young priest that visited their parish, vile because he raised a song in the midst of a sermon. His sister; Ifeoma and daughter; Amaka were sinners because they wore lipsticks and trousers. In short, with Eugene, there are no gray areas.

DSM-V's delineation of OCPD involves an impairment of daily functioning that stems from an interference with the formation of interpersonal relationships on the part of the victim. This is to say that there is an emphasis on the psychosocial impact of mental health disorders on the sufferer and the general populace. In Eugene's case, his maniac fixation with perfectionism, order and control hampers his relationship with his family. Agreed, Eugene loved them but he did not know how to love them. This paradoxical stance portrays an emotional distancing from his family and informs his inability to form a cohesive bond with his wife and children as such that the love from his hot tea, instead of soothing, 'burn[s] [their] tongue' (p. 31). The bond shared in Eugene's household was fostered by fear. Kambili notes that she

was '...familiar with fear, yet each time [she] felt it, it was never the same as other times...' (p. 194). Here, the excessive fear for their father from the home produces a set of maladjusted 'zombies' that are psychologically marred. This as well will have a debilitating effect on the society, for children from these kinds of homes often sprout harbouring an inferiority complex that sponsors either an antisocial personality disorder or dependency personality disorder. From the text, Kambili buttresses this view in her characterization as a tongue-tied character. She seldom speaks and when she manages to do so, she stutters, whispers or have lumps formed in her throat. Throughout the story, she repeatedly says, 'my words would not come out', 'my legs could not move', 'my lips held stubbornly together'. At school, she is wrongfully perceived as a backyard snob, because she finds it difficult to integrate and socialize with other students at school.

In line with the pedagogy of OCPD, Eugene assumes himself the controller of other people's lives. He takes the responsibility to steer his family in the 'right' course too rigidly that he becomes over bearing and resorts to violence and cruel punishments. With the delusion that he has to deliver them from the savagery of hell and that everything he does is for their good, he burns Kambili's feet with hot water, damages Jaja's pinkie finger, often beats his wife while inducing countless miscarriages by gruesome physical assaults. With the wrongfully perceived threat to his authority when Kambili refused to remove Papa Nnukwu's picture, Eugene; ...started to kick ...the metal buckles on his slippers stung like bees from giant mosquitoes. He talked nonstop, out of control... Godlessness. Heathen worship. Hellfire ...the stinging was raw now ... because the metal landed on open skin ... more slaps... a salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away into quiet (p. 207)

Moreover, his constant shedding of tears when he inflicts pain on members of his family reveals the depth of his psychological and mental imbalance. He is a man that is constantly at war with himself, and by extension with the society as exemplified by his family. He is in a constant innate battle and it informs his

proclivity towards violence. Obviously, his mental state was causing him pain as well as such that he 'acts out' on account of it. Amaka in confirmation of this position tells Obiora her brother, 'Uncle Eugene is not a bad man ... people have problems ... some people can't deal with stress' (p. 246). On the whole, although the murdering of any human is not justified, Eugene comes across as one who is already fallen apart, even before his actual death.

Conclusion

Borrowing a cue from Amaka; Eugene's niece, this paper focused on relating that the character Eugene is not necessarily the devil that he has often been made out to be. A reconsideration of his character portrayal in *Purple Hibiscus* shows that he himself is equally a victim and that there are certain underlying factors that informs his extreme violence towards his wife and children. Such is the case in Nigeria where there are a lot of individuals who come across as violent and oftentimes, there are castigated on account of that. However, because they are not psychotic, roaming the streets and not connecting with reality, they are often not considered mentally challenged. Again, because mental illness in Nigeria is always mirrored with the 'louded' ones like schizophrenia, depression and the likes and because, mental illness often comes with a label- crazy, mad, shame, people often find it hard to associate with mental disorders or speak out about what they are going through. This therefore is a call for a continued effort in raising awareness, not only for the 'heavy' categories of mental disorders but also for the ones considered 'less heavy'. Likewise, this paper presents a call for people to always look beyond the surface before casting aspersions on others.

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