

The Intertextual Imagination
in Purple Hibiscus
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“I like to think of Achebe as the writer whose work gave me permission to write my own stories.”

—Chimamanda Adichie (qtd. in Monaghan B7)

In his book *The African Imagination*, Abiola Irele points out that African literature “carries with it a particular ambiguity of reference in its present and common usage” (5), by which he means that because of its colonial history Africa’s literature can rarely be defined in either national or linguistic terms, as is the case elsewhere. There are three broad categories of African literature, by Irele’s account: oral literature in African languages, new written literatures in African languages, and new written literatures in European languages.¹ Depending on one’s perspective, the African imagination is either constrained or liberated by this reality, but in either case the practical result is that writers function under a different set of assumptions than one finds in areas where national and literary identity are more closely linked. In short, intertextuality—the complex relationship between works of diverse nationalities and time periods—works differently and under different conditions in African literature than elsewhere.

What is the nature of this African intertextuality? Irele argues that oral literature is an African writer’s most significant allusive material; it is the “fundamental reference of discourse,” and it “represents the basic intertext of the African imagination” (11). Without disputing this claim, this article asserts that the nature of the intertextual imagination in African literature is becoming increasingly rich and complex as time passes and as new generations of writers create new works. As African writing continues to develop, we increasingly witness the phe-

nomenon of intergenerational intertextuality, as writers respond to and draw from not their oral traditions on the one hand and European literary models on the other but also from an increasing body of recent African writing. This article wishes to explore this dynamic by looking at a specific example of such intertextuality, how Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie responds to her compatriot and elder, Chinua Achebe, through her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus*. In examining Adichie's relationship to Achebe's text, we can see what happens to the African imagination in such a setting and consider the benefits and shortcomings of this new era in African letters.

Purple Hibiscus has received an overwhelmingly positive reception since its publication in 2003. Accomplishments include winning the Commonwealth Prize and the Hurston-Wright Foundation Award, a shortlist ranking in the Orange Prize, and a longlist mention for the Booker. After an equally successful second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie was awarded a MacArthur "genius grant." All this has placed Adichie prominently among a group of young Nigerian writers whose efforts are revitalizing West African writing.

Increasingly, these young writers are coalescing into a group described as a third generation of modern Nigerian literature. By such accounts, the first generation consists of writers like Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, John Pepper Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Flora Nwapa and others who came of age and began to publish in the period around independence. Writers of the subsequent, second generation made their mark in the decade following the Biafran conflict and include names such as Niyi Osundare, Femi Osofisan, Buchi Emecheta and Tanure Ojaide. This leaves the third generation to comprise those writers who were born and educated after 1960, who never personally experienced the colonial period, and whose writings began to appear in the mid-1980s. They include Ben Okri, Helen Oyeyemi, Sefi Atta, Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Okey Ndibe, Uzodinma Iweala, and now also Adichie.²

Like all generalizations of this type, these generational categories lose coherence and lapse into pointilistic absurdity when examined too closely, but they can serve a meaningful purpose when deployed from

a distance, as a general guide. And when it comes to viewing third-generation Nigerian writers in this manner, four salient conclusions emerge. The first is that the recent past looms large for this group. Many of their works look to recent national traumas: military dictatorship, corruption, human rights abuses, and above all the Biafran conflict.³ As a result, Adichie and her age-mates are decidedly backward-looking in their instincts. Secondly, questions of national and cultural identity concern this generation, but in ways distinct from their predecessors. Many of these writers have lived and studied abroad, and questions about their identity as individuals and what exact category their writing belongs in can be complicated. Unlike earlier generations, whose formal studies and literary models were uniformly British, these writers have been brought up with the categories and genres of contemporary world literature, and their aesthetics are informed by discourses that include the postmodern, the postcolonial, magical realism, and the dynamics of globalization. As a result, their stylistic range and thematic concerns are broader than those of earlier Nigerian writers. Thirdly, this generation demonstrates an appetite for experimentation with language that results from a level of ease and sophistication with English because, for many of them, it is for all practical purposes their first language. As a result their texts are linguistically experimental, and in many cases their main thematic preoccupation is language itself. All of them show a remarkable skill in creating an identifiable and unique literary voice. Finally, this generation labours under an obvious but understandable anxiety of influence, as the giants of Nigerian literature who preceded them cast long shadows. To be a third generation writer means coming to terms not only with the legacy of parents but of grandparents as well. As Heather Hewett aptly observes, “Adichie, like her peers, is directly engaged with the Nigerian literary canon and is furthermore making a case for her inclusion in it” (78).

This article demonstrates how all four of these trends overtly and dramatically manifest themselves in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, making her novel an excellent representative text for this “third generation” of Nigerian literature—but even more, one that is well aware of its historical antecedents and thus characterized to a remarkable degree by an

intergenerational intertextuality. The novel is noteworthy both for the way that it connects backwards in time to the literary generations that precede it and for the way that those very connections open up fresh perspectives and reveal a rich and complex panoply of intertextual possibilities that were not available in earlier generations, thus manifesting a new stage in the ongoing elaboration of Africa's literary imagination.

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Purple Hibiscus distinguishes itself as a powerful meditation on the nature of language, one that offers a sophisticated consideration of its dangers and possibilities. Specifically, it is the story of a stifled child who eventually finds her voice, and in exploring this concept, Adichie puts her text in dialogue with earlier generations of Nigerian writing—most obviously with Achebe's monumental work, *Things Fall Apart*.⁴ She does so in a way that engages not only Achebe's novel but also the broader context of his well-known public positions on the role of the English language in African literature. *Purple Hibiscus* engages the literary traditions of the past even as it struggles to find its own way. In the same way that Adichie's protagonist, Kambili, ultimately succeeds in her struggle to find a voice, the novel itself is a manifestation of Adichie's attempts to write in a context dominated by influential literary predecessors. As a consequence, it offers insights about the complexities of what it means to be a young writer today, as well as what it means to write in English as an African.

Most early reviews of *Purple Hibiscus* focus on its successful deployment of a female coming-of-age plot. Fifteen year-old Kamibili is a sensitive girl with a domineering, abusive, and zealously Catholic father. The father, Eugene, is a prosperous businessman, lauded by his extended family and his clansmen with the title *Omelora*, "The One Who Does for the Community" (56). Eugene is heroic in two ways: he combats governmental corruption in the running of his many enterprises, most notably by publishing an independent and outspoken newspaper; and he also rejects pressures to take a second wife when his marriage fails to produce what the extended family considers an adequate number of children for such an important man. Ironically, Eugene's admirable and progressive public stances are matched by a marked intolerance

and tyranny in his own household. He harshly punishes his children if they achieve anything other than first place in their class. Their every hour is carefully programmed, and life with Eugene is punctuated by strict religious observances and excessive expressions of devotion: long-winded prayers before meals, attendance at the longest and most boring masses, rosary recitations at all occasions—all undergirded by the most conservative interpretations of sacramental practice. Eugene is particularly intolerant of alternative religious experience, rejecting with especial vehemence Pentecostalism on the one hand and all aspects of African Traditional Religion on the other. This latter prejudice leads to estrangement from his own father.

Growing up in this well-heeled but terrifying setting, Kambili is a nervous wreck, never knowing when to expect another outburst of physical abuse from her father. There are several horrifying instances of Eugene's violence against the children and their mother, and the family develops a range of coping mechanisms for dealing with this pathological home environment. Inevitably, Kambili's older brother, Jaja, rebels, and Kambili herself comes to new understandings of her situation when, as a result of political unrest, the children spend an unexpected week with the family of their wise university-professor aunt, at Nsukka. This leads Kambili to defy her father, with painful results. Eugene's end is tragic, and the novel's conclusion, which can hardly be called happy, leaves Kambili and the rest of the family as trauma survivors—deeply wounded but at least headed in the right direction down the long road toward emotional healing.

As many reviewers have appreciated, *Purple Hibiscus* demonstrates how the discovery and exercise of one's own authentic voice is the *sine qua non* for living a worthwhile life of dignity and self-respect. There is a complexity and tenderness to Kambili's character that illuminates both the fragility and resilience of the human spirit, and we may profitably read the story as an exploration of strategies for surviving and resisting patriarchy—read it, that is, as a female, African *bildungsroman*.⁵ Moving beyond the personal, some reviewers take Kambili as metaphor for the nation, in the sense that her quest for individual freedom mirrors a larger, Nigerian struggle against oppressive rule and corrupt governance.⁶ In all

cases, reviewers have expressed their admiration for Adichie's skill in her craft: in characterization, pacing, tone, diction and psychological depth, *Purple Hibiscus* displays a remarkably mature control of language for such a young writer.⁷

An obvious feature of *Purple Hibiscus* is its allusion to that other famous novel from Adichie's compatriot and fellow Igbo, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. *Purple Hibiscus* opens with an obvious nod to Achebe in the very first line, where Kambili observes that "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the *étagère*" (3).

While this opening contains the most obvious nod to Achebe, there are many more. Deji Toyé, writing in the Nigerian *Guardian*, finds the same thing. He observes that Adichie's novel is an exploration of what he terms the "Okonkwo complex." In Eugene, Adichie creates an Okonkwo figure, plopped down in a different era and facing different challenges to his worldview, but clearly possessed of the same drive, the same mix of talents and shortcoming, and above all the same fundamental character flaw, which is that everything he does he must take to an extreme, with fatal consequences. Like Okonkwo, Eugene despises his father and dedicates his life to being as unlike him as possible. Like Okonkwo, Eugene finds success in his work, as a community leader, and as a man of many titles. But also like Okonkwo, Eugene, in his death, ironically ends up remarkably like the father whom he rejects. Okonkwo's tragedy is that the nature of his death makes him an outcast, stripped of titles and other symbols of all that he valued and lived for. Eugene likewise shuns his father and tries to isolate him as a "pagan," but in the end it is Eugene, poisoned by his own wife, who dies ignominiously and alone, without access to the sanctifying last rites of extreme unction that he considered so important.

Besides the way that it presents a contemporary Nigerian model of the "Okonkwo complex," we can see how Adichie's novel closely mirrors Achebe's writing in its discursive register, finding a language that is accessible to outside readers but grounded in local cadences and turns of phrase. There are occasional untranslated Igbo words, but always with

enough context to understand them. When a uniquely Nigerian practice is introduced, it appears with sufficient explanation for its foreignness to be understandable to outsiders. For example, in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe takes pains to describe and explain the *egwugu*, the masked performers who represent ancestral spirits. In a similar way, Kambili's ignorance of traditional practices in *Purple Hibiscus* means that several pages can be dedicated to an explanation of the representation of the various *mmuo* spirits at the Aro festival (84–87). Both writers want these traditional religious practices to make sense to non-Igbo readers.

Another point of similarity is the description of the arrival of the first European missionaries among the Igbo. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes that moment through the narrator's voice:

The arrival of the missionaries had caused a considerable stir in the village of Mbanta. There were six of them and one was a white man. Every man and woman came out to see the white man. Stories about these strange men had grown since one of them had been killed in Abame and his iron horse tied to the sacred silk-cotton tree. (144)

In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie describes the same moment, through the voice of Papa-Nnukwu, whose tone of bemused reflection on this crucial historic moment offers a strong echo of Achebe's version:

I remember the first one that came to Abba, the one they called Fada John. His face was red like palm oil; they say our type of sun does not shine in the white man's land. He had a helper, a man from Nimo called Jude. (84)

Additionally, there are numerous stylistic similarities between the two novels. Like Achebe, Adichie offers up generous doses of proverbs and Igboisms, the most memorable being the moment when Eugene ejects Anikwena, an elder of his father's age set, from the compound of Eugene's luxurious family home in the village of Abba, because the old man is not a Christian. As he is escorted out, Anikwena "kept looking back and throwing words" at Eugene: "*Ifukwa gi!* You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave!" (70)

Another obvious nod to Achebe appears in Adichie's retelling of the etiological folk tale about why the tortoise has a cracked shell. In Achebe's novel, at almost the exact mid-point of *Things Fall Apart*, one of Okonkwo's wives relates a full version of this story, which serves a dual function in Achebe's narrative: it reminds us of his overall point, that Igbo society before the coming of Europeans was a healthy, complete, and self-sustaining society with a rich cultural heritage, and it also serves as a metaphor for the trickery of the Europeans and the need for a unified response. In this instance, Achebe takes a widely-known motif from African oral tradition and deploys it for a specific, counter-hegemonic purpose.⁸ Adichie deploys the same tale, but with a rather different end.

Also at the heart of her story and in the midst of Kambili's transformation, Adichie has Papa-Nnukwu tell the story of the tortoise and its cracked shell. But while it is overtly the same tale, Adichie's version of this story contains some notable differences from the one that Achebe used. In Adichie's version, Tortoise is also cunning and greedy and during a famine tricks his way into a feast, but with the additional twist that he blackmails the equally cunning Dog, who gets his revenge by causing Tortoise to fall from the sky and shatter his shell. More importantly, in Adichie's version it is not so much the content of the story that is significant as the way that the listeners participate. The children join the songs at the right times, and at the end they raise unanswered questions about the story, suggesting that this is precisely the point of a narrative—to raise questions and speculations. This is a new idea for Kambili, who has been raised in the context of Eugene's monolithic narratives, and it shows her that these stories offer new possibilities: "I watched them and wished that I had joined in chanting the *Njemanzel* response" (161).

In short, the parallels to *Things Fall Apart* in Adichie's novel are numerous and obvious—perhaps so much so that Adichie feels compelled to downplay some of these connections, as she does in a 2004 interview, stating that *Purple Hibiscus* does not deliberately "reproduce" Achebe's novel:

At least not consciously. The first line [of the novel] is indeed a tribute to Achebe, who remains the most important writer for me. But I am not interested in reproducing him, or anyone else. I am interested, rather, in writing about Nigerian issues in a way that acknowledges my influences and yet remains entirely mine. (Adebanwi)

In this carefully-worded response, Adichie articulates the challenges for the new generation of African writers of which she is a part. The anxiety of influence exerted by figures like Achebe and Soyinka must be weighty indeed, especially since these writers are still alive even as their novels have become classics. There are all manner of ways in which these literary father figures make their presence felt.⁹

The influences, allusions, and tributes do not end with *Things Fall Apart*: readers familiar with Nigerian writing will notice that in *Purple Hibiscus* Adichie also invokes other Nigerian works. Wale Adebanwi, for example, suggests there are parallels to other Achebe novels, specifically *Arrow of God* and *Man of the People*. Moving beyond Achebe, we find a nod to Amos Tutuola's palm-wine drinkard in the character of the driver Kevin, who sports an impressive scar on his neck because

[h]e had fallen from a palm tree in his hometown in the Niger Delta area, a few years ago while on vacation. The scar ran from the center of his head to the nape of his neck. It was shaped like a dagger. (Adichie 63)

The military government's imprisonment of the novel's heroic newspaper editor, Ade Coker, and his subsequent death, invoke the memory of Ken Saro-Wiwa and other outspoken Nigerian journalists and writers. And the literary allusions extend even farther. Hewett argues that "Adichie has a wide range of literary forefathers, foremothers, and sisters that includes Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Maya Angelou, Sapphire, and Edwidge Danticat" (89).

The obvious and recurrent instances of intertextuality that we find in *Purple Hibiscus* become most meaningful and instructive when we

connect them to the issues of voice and language raised by the novel, an approach that can illuminate the situation and condition of other third-generation Nigerian writers as well. The story of Kambili's quest for identity and the insights she gains as she learns to speak with confidence take on an important additional dimension when we consider them in light of Adichie's position *vis-à-vis* her literary forebears. The key issue in all of this is the role of language, and it is therefore worth examining one specific function of language in her novel.

There are various kinds of languages in *Purple Hibiscus*: the language of religious imagery, the symbolism of the *mmuo* (which Papa-Nnuku must interpret for his grandchildren), and the unspoken "eye language" that Jaja and Kambili invent to express their true feelings at home. The greatest power, however, resides with those who have mastered the language of power—which is to say English—and when it comes to this sort of lexical mastery, it is Eugene who dominates. It is no surprise that one of his most successful business ventures is an English-language newspaper, the *Standard*. Through this publication, "Brother Eugene spoke out for freedom," his priest asserts (5). Eugene is also notable for how he "changed his accent when he spoke, sounding British" (46) when addressing white religious authorities. This represents a notable contrast to the language of his father, Papa Nnukwu, whose "dialect was ancient; his speech had none of the anglicized inflections that ours had" (64).

At home, Eugene skillfully manipulates words to assert his vision and his desires. He can be subtle, as when he shames Kambili for her second-place finish at the end of the term, a punishment almost worse than the physical beating that she was expecting; he is skilled at emotional manipulation. More frequently, Eugene's words are a blunter weapon. It seems fitting that the text's first mention of Eugene is a description of how "Papa flung his heavy missal across the room," missing Jaja but shattering his wife's figurines (3). A missal consists of words, and Eugene never hesitates to use his words as missiles.¹⁰ To him, the *mmuo* ceremony is "devilish folklore" (85), the elder Anikwena is "a worshiper of idols" (70), and his own father he labels a "pagan" (81).¹¹ Above all, Eugene wishes to control the words of others. He mandates numerous

recitations of the rosary, and manages to turn his wife's miscarriage—caused by his own brutality—into something that requires prayers for *her* forgiveness (35).

Although he is a champion of free speech in the broader sphere, at home Eugene maintains strict censorship, controlling carefully what may be said. Only praise is permitted for his factory's new soft drinks or biscuits (40). The children know very well what may and what may not be spoken aloud, and in the face of this overwhelming verbal tyranny, Kambili generally finds herself inarticulate and powerless. She stutters, and she feels like “bubbles in my throat” (179) block her speech. The phrase “I wished I had thought to say that” becomes a reflective *leit-motif* through the first half of the book. There is a seductive attraction to Eugene's linguistic skills: “Sometimes I forgot myself, sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice, to the important things he said,” Kambili claims (25). Inevitably, though, Eugene's voice becomes repressive. Eugene has a way with words and he gets his way, with words. His is the story of a man, skilled in language, who uses words as tools of control and domination.

Approaching the text from this direction, the path is relatively straightforward as we move to a discussion of resistance, to an analysis of how Jaja and Kambili reject Eugene's domination, of what strategies they deploy, and of the extent to which these strategies succeed or fail. Since Kambili's dominance involves language, there are various instances of alternative forms of resistance, attempts to escape linguistic repression by circumventing or bypassing entirely the overbearing power of the word. At various times the characters experiment with operating outside spoken language, doing away with words completely and finding new forms of self expression. One such attempt is the children's *asusu anya*, the communication they share through meaningful glances with their “eye language” (108). Other extra-linguistic strategies such as laughter, song, and the tending of flowers (like Jaja's interest in the hybrid hibiscus that give the novel its title) appear as ways of avoiding and resisting Eugene's domination. Jaja also uses the technique of refusal—he refuses to take communion, and he refuses to praise his father's products. Mama, we realize, has been offering resistance all along, when the

poison that she has steadily added to Eugene's tea finally takes effect and kills him.

None of these forms of resistance, however, is satisfactory. Because language is such a central element of Eugene's power, the most effective resistance must ultimately also come through language. In the end, Kambili finally accepts that she must enter, engage, and master the linguistic realm. The turning point for her, and indeed for the entire narrative, occurs at the house of her aunt, when she finally summons the courage to respond to her acerbic cousin Amaka. "*O ginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth?" demands Aunt Ifeoma. "Talk back to her!" (170). Kambili does, and from here on the story becomes a matter of learning to exercise this newfound agency.

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What is the relationship of *Purple Hibiscus* to its literary predecessors? Adichie's novel is marked by a strong intertextuality, most obviously with Achebe but also with other Nigerian writers. Through the success not only of his early novels but also in his work as the editor for the groundbreaking Heinemann's African Writers Series, for which he selected the first one hundred or so titles, Achebe has affected the direction of African writing in profound ways. This influence of Achebe and his age-mates—Soyinka, Okigbo, Ekwensi and others—might feel overwhelming. How can someone like Adichie acknowledge this influence and yet not be overly restricted by it? How does one honour such a heritage even as one tries to do something new? How does one challenge those earlier narratives when such challenge is called for, without diminishing their importance?

Hewett observes that Adichie is "directly engaged" with her country's literary canon (78), and her analysis of the nature of that engagement focuses principally on the issue of voice, figured metonymically by the mouth. For Kambili to find her voice in spite of her father's domineering ways offers a hopeful analogy for third-generation Nigerian writers who also feel the urge to speak up in their writing. If we recall that in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's wives "cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story" of their experiences (48), we might by this account view Kambili as a mouthpiece for those silenced women; as

Kambili finds her voice, so do they. While this focus on the voice is compelling, we might extend this analysis by examining how it is not only the voice but language itself that demonstrates both the problem and the possibilities of speaking out. The fact that language is the locus of the conflict in *Purple Hibiscus* reminds us of the broader language debate in African literature—a debate in which Achebe has figured prominently. It would seem that the challenge for all generations of Nigerian writers has been to find the appropriate idiom in which to express themselves. If this is not a new problem, it manifests itself in new ways for each generation.

Approaching the issue in this light invites us to consider the intergenerational intertextuality in Adichie less as a confrontational battle against an oppressive paternal muzzle and more as an attempt to wrestle with the problem of expressing an authentic narrative of one's own without ignoring the influences, both positive and negative, of one's literary heritage. Jane Bryce observes that women writers of Nigeria's third generation offer a variety of narrative strategies to deal with a literary heritage that is overwhelmingly masculine and nationalist in its orientation, but that the best way to describe this intergenerational relationship is as a "historical entanglement" (53) rather than as either a rejection or an adaptation. These new writers, she suggests, do their work

in full recognition of the fictions which have preceded them and have, so far, defined the terrain on which articulation can take place. Rather than contesting or opposing this definition, they enter into a dialogue that allows them to redefine it, using the terms and techniques of preceding generations while calling into question their interpretation of the past. (64)

In their overview of Nigeria's "third generation" of novels and novelists, Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton argue that "for all its diversity, the new Nigerian novel does exhibit distinctive features" (ix). I am suggesting that the phenomenon of linguistic experimentation is a form of "historical entanglement" that might be one such distinctive feature. Adichie and her colleagues deploy language in innovative ways that reflect both their appreciation of and their independence from their liter-

ary ancestors. That is to say, it seems that the new generation of Nigerian writers are finding their own answers to the problematic language question that has been so important in contemporary African literature. Rather than focusing on whether or not one should use the colonial languages, they are more interested in how language itself contains and replicates the dilemmas of cultural identity, and they seem interested in finding strategies for deploying language in new ways. Just as Eugene's oppressive power is most fully manifested in language and just as *Purple Hibiscus* explores a variety of responses to that language, Adichie *et alia* are not just looking for new things to say, they are looking for a new vocabulary and linguistic register in which to say them. Achebe and Adichie both may tell the tale of why the tortoise has a cracked shell, but the more recent version will have new twists, new contexts, and new implications in its retelling.

There are a number of observations we can make about intertextual strategies in *Purple Hibiscus*, by way of conclusion. The first is that because Adichie and her third-generation cohorts emphasize an individual rather than communal identity in their works, their linguistic choices reflect a more individualistic outlook than we find in the works of preceding generations. In composing *Things Fall Apart* as a counternarrative response to colonial texts, Achebe presents a corrective perspective both from the point of view of a specific character (Okonkwo) as well as of a given community (Umuofia). But despite the fact that Okonkwo stands out as a memorable individual, his story is ultimately the story of a community since we can understand him only in the context of his society. Things may fall apart for Okonkwo personally, but this is not really what drives his story, since the most important message of the novel is that for Igbo society the encounter with Europeans was such that it unraveled the whole system. This encounter "put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart," observes Obeirika (176). In this expression, the plural pronoun—the communal identity—is more important than Okonkwo's personal tragedy. When Obierika speaks, he is speaking for the community, just as the D.C.'s narrative-in-progress with which the novel ends represents a communal (European) voice. By contrast, Kambili's story has the opposite dynamic—we note the com-

munity dynamics, but in the end it is her own individual development that is at stake.

Secondly and relatedly, we can see how the new Nigerian writing emphasizes an internal, psychological exploration of identity issues that seems qualitatively different from that in earlier works. In those earlier novels, personal identity is frequently linked to a national identity, often allegorically, and we can understand why if we attend to the changed educational contexts of the older generation of writers themselves. Emmanuel Obiechina's 1975 essay on the "Background to the West African Novel" points to changes brought by literacy as being the most important influence on writers from the region (330). First-generation writers belonged to a new, educated, elite social class whose hallmarks were mobility and cultural nationalism. These narratives of nationalism, of the problematic conflicts between tradition and modernity, and of the disillusioned critique of neocolonial realities—the dominant themes of first-generation writing—are social and external in nature. Two generations later, for Adichie and her cohort, the nature of an elite education has changed, and we might say that outward mobility has been replaced by internal exploration, a journey into the individual psyche with an interest not in cultural nationalism but in personal identity. The hero(ine) is less a metaphor for the nation than she is an autonomous being in whom the prevailing social and political tensions and contradictions of the day manifest themselves. The changing role of language mirrors the shift in the nature of the protagonists, from an emphasis on their public selves to a more private, internal idiom.¹²

Thirdly, we can assert that the new Nigerian writing is poly- rather than univocal—not necessarily in the narrative voice itself, but in the range of texts that new writers can use for inspiration and influence. The reality for Achebe was that he wrote in the colonial language and was largely responding to other texts in the English literary tradition, and as part of his response he drew from oral traditions in the manner described by Irele. For Adichie, by contrast, English is the language of her family, but it is also only one among several such languages, and she finds herself in a position where she can draw on and interact with a wider range of global literary traditions and trends. This is not to

deny that problematic social and political issues arising from the hegemony of English no longer exist; it is rather to say that the specifics of those issues have changed and that Adichie is writing from, and therefore also writing with, a more polylinguistic and polyvocal set of circumstances.

What it means to be a Nigerian novelist has changed a great deal in the fifty-plus years since the appearance of *Things Fall Apart*. If Achebe, like Okonkwo's wives and on behalf of all aspiring African writers, was looking for the mouth with which to speak the Igbo story that had been so maligned and misrepresented in colonial narratives, we can be satisfied in knowing that today this battle has largely been won. Adichie and her peers are free to move beyond the problem of finding the mouth with which to speak; they are able to experiment with new ways of expressing and formulating their experiences, even to the point of engaging and interrogating the ways in which the founding figures of the Nigerian novel have told the tale. This does not mean that the dilemmas of cultural identity and expression have not gone away, but they have taken on a different sort of complexity.

As a representative of third-generation Nigerian literature, *Purple Hibiscus* demonstrates how the literary imagination operates within a context that has evolved considerably in the past fifty years. Maybe it used to be true, as Abiola Irele asserts, that "the problem of the African writer employing a European language is *how to write an oral culture*" (16). As Adichie's novel reveals, the intertextual realities and possibilities for today's writers include this problem, but they also extend well beyond it.

Notes

- 1 Irele omits an important fourth category, which is the tradition of older literatures written in African languages, such as Amharic and Swahili.
- 2 For representative genealogies of Nigerian writing—which can differ slightly in their details—see Oha (who also cites Nnolim), and Hewett (who proposes a three-generation model following Griswold, Adesanmi, and Ojaide). See also an outline of Nigeria's literary "generations" in Griffiths (173). In 2005, the South-African journal *English in Africa* published a special issue on "New Nigerian Writing," and *Research in African Literatures* followed up in Summer 2008 with

- a special issue on “Nigeria’s Third-Generation Novel.” As Adichie herself puts it, referring to recent novels by Atta and Iweala, “[W]e are part of a real renaissance in Nigerian writing” (“Author Profile” 5).
- 3 Adesanmi and Dunton refer to Adichie’s second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, as “the culminating achievement in a resuscitation of the Nigerian Civil War novel in recent years” (viii).
 - 4 Killam and Rowe identify *Things Fall Apart* as the “first standard West African novel in English” (185). This might be debated: Cyprian Ekwensi published *People of the City* in 1954 as well as a shorter romance in 1947, Amos Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*. Two other books appeared in the early 1950s, and Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* is a predecessor from 1789. Still, Achebe’s work is the dominant early title from the country that (along with South Africa) has made the most dramatic contributions to anglophone literature in Africa.
 - 5 Kessel concludes that “Adichie’s novel is distinctly female—a perspective often missing from the canon of African literature” (122). Looking at “the new directions that fictional accounts of women’s identities are taking in Nigeria,” Bryce argues that it is typical of third-generation Nigerian women writers to use narrative strategies that challenge national and gender identities, and that “this time around, the story of Nigeria will not be gendered masculine” (65).
 - 6 See Hartl, Highfield, Hope, Lewitschnik, Ogoke, and Oha.
 - 7 See Bell-Gam, Broun, Dawes, Kessel, Roy, and Williams.
 - 8 For a focus on the tale as a narrative of resistance, see Harlow (78). Slaughter agrees that in Achebe’s novel the story functions as an “anti-colonialist allegory,” but that it also has larger implications, namely that it is a cautionary tale about the dangers of ambitious individualism more generally (137).
 - 9 Hewett notes that “In one of the ironies of history, Adichie grew up in the same house in which Chinua Achebe lived at the University of Nigeria’s Nsukka campus” (92, n19).
 - 10 When Anikwena goes out “throwing words” back at Eugene (70), it is a rare but ineffective attempt to use Eugene’s own tactics against him—ineffective because Anikwena has not mastered the language of power, which in this context is English.
 - 11 He’s neither a pagan nor a heathen, responds Aunt Ifeoma—he’s a “traditionalist” (81, 166).
 - 12 This dynamic raises a question, which cannot be pursued here, about the implications of such a development. There are some who might lament this marked move away from a communal identity and perspective on the grounds that it reflects a fundamentally non-African, individualistic discourse. At the same time, critics have also pointed out how the cultural nationalism of first-generation African writing might also be described as grounded on an imported and misguided essentialism. See Amoko and Gikandi.

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