

# THE REPRESENTATION OF PANA-AFRICANISM IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS* AND CHIKA UNIGWE'S *NIGHT DANCER*

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## Abstract

One of the most recurrent concerns of African writers is the identity crisis brought about by colonial education and the political system implemented through African administrations and institutions. African novelists use their literary works to decry the wrongs that impede the development of their postcolonial societies. They, actually, use their novels as bullets to fight against colonial ill-doings in order to restore African identity. In this respect, this study essentially focuses on both Nigerian Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to highlight how the selected authors value African cultures. The theory for implementing this research is the Afrocentric approach which stands as an important scanner to analyze the selected works. As objectives, the critical study will discuss African traditional religion and also analyze African celebrations. In sum, this research paper points out how the identity crisis has been engendered by colonization.

Keywords: Afrocentric, Pan-Africanism, culture, identity.

## Résumé

L'une des préoccupations les plus récurrentes des écrivains africains est la crise 'identitaire provoquée par l'éducation coloniale et le système politique mis en place par les administrations et les institutions africaines. Les romanciers africains utilisent leurs œuvres littéraires pour dénoncer les torts qui entravent le développement de leurs sociétés postcoloniales. En fait, ils utilisent leurs romans comme des balles pour lutter contre les méfaits de la colonisation afin de restaurer l'identité africaine. À cet égard, cette étude se concentre essentiellement sur les romans *Night Dancer* et *Purple Hibiscus* respectivement de nigérianes Chika Unigwe et Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie afin de mettre en évidence la manière dont celles-ci valorisent les cultures africaines. La théorie utilisée dans cette recherche repose sur l'approche afro-centriste qui constitue un scanner important pour analyser les œuvres sélectionnées. Comme objectifs, l'étude critique discutera de la religion traditionnelle africaine mais analysera également les

différentes célébrations africaines. En somme, ce travail de recherche souligne comment la crise identitaire a été générée par la colonisation.

Mots-clés : Afrocentrisme, panafricanisme, culture, identité.

## **Introduction**

One of the most recurrent concerns of African writers is the identity crisis brought about by colonial education and the political system implemented through African administrations and institutions. Conscious of the downfall of African socio-cultural values and norms, African writers, particularly Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe, vividly criticize ill-doings and cultural stratification that jeopardize the gleam of Africanity.

In their novels, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chika Unigwe denounce how some African values undergo the process of disappearance because of the domination of Western cultures. Actually, European cultural values had been introduced in Africa by colonization through means such as movies, books, and media. As a result, these means culturally victimized African youngsters; they toxify African originality and identity. Because of the calamities engendered by colonization, Chika Unigwe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie retaliate against European cultural barbarism and oppression in their novels. Besides, they fight against African cultural degradation in *Night Dancer* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Through their fictions, Adichie and Unigwe decry socio-cultural maladies that impede the development of African cultures in the postcolonial era. They use the selected novels as bullets to fight against colonial viruses so as to restore African identity worldwide.

One can observe that in Anglophone African literature less transversal critical analysis has been carried out on *Night Dancer* and *Purple Hibiscus*. Indeed, no observable critical attention has been done on the concept of Africanity in the selected imaginative works. Lots of critical investigations focus on a singular interpretation of each novel rather than critically crossing them to point out African divinities and modes of living or celebration. For instance, critics such as Ogaga Okuyade, Musa W. Dube, and Audrey Peters, to name but these, focus only on *Purple Hibiscus* throughout their studies. On the other side, *Night Dancer* did not get much critical attention like *Purple Hibiscus*. Nevertheless, a few critics such as Chinyere Otuu Egbuta *et al*, Daria Tunca *et al*, Núria Codina Solà, to mention but these, are impressed by the

novel. While both groups of critics separately contemplate each novel, this research systematically examines both selected fictions together to better highlight some hidden African cultural heritage and values.

This analysis essentially highlights how the selected authoresses appraise African cultures in their fiction. In addition, the theory for implementing this critical analysis lies in the Afrocentric approach which stands as a significant scanner to analyze the selected works.

To shed light on the concept of Afrocentricity, Midas Chawane (“The development of Afrocentricity: A historical survey” 2016: 79), states that Afrocentricity is “a manner of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate.” Furthermore, Samuel Burbanks opines that:

Afrocentricity is the critical analysis and interpretation of culture, economy, history, language, philosophy, politics, and society from a conceptual, methodological, and theoretical framework that centers Africa and privileges the agency of Africans and persons of African descent. Afrocentricity is a critical and reflexive response to the production and reproduction of knowledge that absolutely privileges the peoples, cultures, thoughts, and experiences of Europe. (S. Burbanks, 2010: 12)

Along with Samuel Burbanks and Midas Chawane, Afrocentricity can be considered as a literary approach that uplifts Africanity and deconstructs any form of the cultural oppression that subdues black men in different geographical spaces. As an outline, this study first discusses African divinities, then analyzes the African traditional festivals, and finally concludes on Pan-Africanism in the selected novels.

### **1. Traditional African Religion**

Chika Unigwe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie write against European values through their fictional works. In *Night Dancer*, Chika Unigwe depicts the practice of African traditional religion through the story of Rapu, one of her female protagonists. Unigwe relates that the male protagonist Echewa used to consult traditional divinities before the birth of his daughter Rapu. To know his daughter’s destiny, the old man Echewa goes to a diviner for consultation. He wants to know if the unborn baby will bring good luck to his family in other words he wants to foresee if the coming of the baby will put an end to his rampant poverty and poor living conditions. The narrator recounts that “seven days after the birth, the baby was presented to the village and named with a drop of local gin on her forehead (...) Rapu (...) was the name that asked the ill to go away and never return” (C. Unigwe, 2009: 137). For Echewa, African traditional religion is a source of prediction that could allow him to detect all that the baby, Rapu, could bring into his family such as happiness. As an illustration, the narrator reports on

the characters' strong belief in African divinities as follows: "Nobody doubted the midwife's words, or the veracity of Ajofia's prophecy, which he had delivered with the confidence of one in direct contact with the gods. Ajofia had assured Echewa that Rapu would make a fortune for the family" (C. Unigwe: 138). The excerpt indicates how some Africans like Echewa are still rooted in their traditional practice. The novelist through the representation of African divinities does not condemn African religion but rather reveals its positive nature. As a matter of fact, African religion has the possibility of revealing the future life of individuals; it has the ability to interpret a person's future life or destiny. Kingston O. Onyijen ("Predestination: A Critique of Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*" in *Abraka Humanities Review* 2020: 152), from a historicist standpoint, argues that Rapu's story is a reflection of "predestination as a cultural belief". Onyijen, opines that Unigwe "draws the readers' attention to African oral heritage and belief in the gods, and preordination as she shapes Rapu in her attempt to survive economically" (Onyijen: 154). For him, the narrative of cultural belief in *Night Dancer* enforces the readers' understanding of African cultural heritage.

As for Adichie, she relates how African religion promotes peace and love. While the protagonist Eugene views his father as a pagan, heathen, or Godless person, Papa Nnukwu fully believes in his ancestral religion. In the narrative, Eugene is opposed to his father's devotion to traditional religion because he is a well-known Christian in Enugu. But, Nnukwu refuses to abandon his ancestral religion in favor of Christianity which he does not know or master. For Eugene, African religion symbolizes darkness, savagery, lack of love, and charity. Unlike Papa Eugene, Nnukwu sees African belief as the core root or pipeline connecting him to his ancestors and God. Mike Ushe explains that:

The divinities do not prevent Africans from knowing or worshiping the Supreme Being direct as some erroneous claim but constitute only a halfway house that is not meant to be a permanent resting place for man's soul. While he may find the divinities 'sufficient' for certain needs, something continues to warn him that sufficiency is only in Supreme Being. ("God, Divinities and Ancestors in African Traditional Religious Thought" 2017: 170)

So, being aware of worshiping God through "semi-autonomous agents" and other divinities, Papa Nnukwu considers his ancestral practices as a Wi-Fi to connect himself with God, the Supreme Being. Kambili tells how she once hid and watched Papa Nnukwu worship his ancestors' god Chineke. She chronicles how Nnukwu's ancestral belief embodies forgiveness and love for egos:

Papa Nnukwu was on a low wooden stool, his legs bent into a triangle. The loose knot of his wrapper had come undone, and the wrapper had slipped off his waist to cover the

tool, its faded blue edges grazing the floor...He was speaking, his face down as if addressing the white chalk line, which now looked yellow. He was talking to gods or the ancestors; (...).

“Chineke! I thank you for this new morning! I thank you for the sun rises.” His lower lip quivered...

“Chineke! Bless my son, Eugene; let the sun not set on his prosperity. Lift the curse they have put on him.” Papa Nnukwu smiled as he spoke. (C.N. Adichie, 2003, Pp. 174-175)

Though Eugene curses and rejects his father Nnukwu, the latter prays for him. Despite the fact that he does not take care of him and oppresses him because of his religion, Nnukwu blesses his son. Through the depiction of the ancestral practice as shown in the above passage, the author does not force her people to become traditionalists but she rather wants to raise collective awareness about the positivity of African religion. By contrasting Christianity with African religion, Adichie points out how colonial institutions and education have severely sabotaged African cultural divinities and practices. Her work does not discuss the seamy side of ancestral practices but points out how African religion possesses good aspects as well as the Western religion.

Furthermore, Adichie paints another aspect of Africinity in her fiction through the female protagonist Amaka's resistance to take a new Roman name for the catholic baptism. Amaka is Aunty Ifeoma's daughter. She is known throughout the story for her courage and enthusiasm. Actually, Amaka does not find it necessary to pick a European name for her baptism because she prefers to keep her African identity. Indeed, she does not want to identify with a Western character. Unlike in *Night Dancer* where there is no identity conflict, Adichie establishes a clash between African identity and European one in order to value African traditional names which are most often looked down in favor of European values. Once, after her baptismal training, Amaka had to choose a name that marks her repentance and her rebirth according to the catholic rules. Finding a new name was so embarrassing for Amaka that the priest Father Amadi proposed to help her pick a European name rather than an African one. The narrator Kambili reveals how Amaka resists the imposition and domination of the Western identity on her. Kambili asserts that “Amaka said she was not interested in choosing an English name, and Father Amadi laughed and said he would help her choose a name if she wants” (C.N. Adichie: 246). In the light of this excerpt, one notices that Amaka and Father Amadi do not have the same understanding and contemplation of African names. Father Amadi is alienated to the Western values and limited in his understanding of African identity. As for Amaka, she has a deep sense of the importance of bearing an African name. From a critical standpoint,

Adichie uses her piece of writing to question Africans and the people from the diaspora about self-recreation or self-valorization in the twenty-first century. Through Amaka's refusal to take an English name, Adichie potentially unwraps the black cover that hides the beauty and cultural pride that are connected to Africa. In addition to the portrayal of traditional religion, the selected writers highlight powerfully the African traditional festivals to assert African values.

## **2. Appraisal of African festivities**

Beyond the portrayal of African ancestral belief, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie proudly appraises Igbo masquerade festivals, by extension African cultures which "have been under relentless assault and bastardization" (M. T. Ndemanu 2018: 70). She takes advantage of her storylines to point out how her people's lives are shaped by traditional values. As a fighter, she deconstructs Eurocentric stereotypes related to African traditional festivals. Her technique of deconstruction is visible through Ifeoma's antithesis ideas or rejection of Eugene's sabotage of the ancestral festival.

In the narrative *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie relates that Papa Eugene views the masquerade festival in Aro as "a heathen festival" (C.N. Adichie: 82). As a product of Western education, Eugene does not see any importance, beauty or pleasure in participating in the Aro festival. When Auntie Ifeoma decides to take Eugene's children to the Aro festival, Mama Beatrice informs her that "Eugene will not let the children go to a heathen festival" (C.N. Adichie: 82). But, Eugene's decision to prevent his children Kambili and Jaja from going to the Aro festival is contested by Ifeoma who stands for Pan-Africanism in the story. As a matter of fact, Ifeoma reacts against her brother Eugene's Eurocentric perception of the Aro masquerade festival by driving Jaja and Kambili to Aro village, where they discover more about their culture. By way of illustration, Eugene's daughter Kambili narrates how she experiences that never-seen cultural festival. She journalistically reports on the cultural even as follows:

The mmuo making its way down the road was surrounded by a few elderly men who rang a shrill bell as the mmuo walked. Its mask was a real, grimacing human skull with sunken eye sockets. A squirming tortoise was tied to its forehead. A snake and three dead chickens hung from its grass-covered body, swinging as the mmuo walked. The crowds near the road move back quickly, fearfully. A few of women turned and dashed into nearby compounds. (C.N. Adichie: 94)

Through Eugene's children's participation in the Aro festival, Adichie gives a deep insight into the root of African culture. The detailed description in the above quotation denotes the narrator's interest in what he reports. The abundance and the strangeness of the items portrayed may look esoteric or mystical to the outsider. But for the narrator they are the essence of the African culture and should be proudly and minutely presented. Ifeoma's attitude in the

story represents an evocation of cultural decolonization. This process of cultural decolonization starts through Ifeoma's ability to transport her brother's children and hers to the masquerade festival. The trip to the village can be equated to the going back to the roots; the quest for the lost cultural identity. The narrative shows Adichie's commitment to educating the African youth, particularly, the Nigerian ones, about the importance of masquerades. In commenting on the utility of masquerade in African societies, namely the Nigerian society, Emmanuel Osewe Akubor in his study shows that the protective role of African masquerades is still denied in neocolonial societies under the influences of other religions such as Islam and Christianity. Akubor opines that "in most African societies, masquerades (...) defend and safeguard society and accordingly prevent all potent threats to their existence" ("Africans Concept of Masquerades and Their Role in Societal Control and Stability: Some Notes on the Esan People of Southern Nigeria" 2016: 33). For him, masquerade embodies a protective dimension in the African social context. Along with Akubor, Innocent Nweke focuses on the connotation of songs and dances in African ceremonies such as masquerade festivals. Nweke argues that songs and dances "convey the faith of worshippers and also express joys and sorrows of the people, their assurances, hopes, and fears of the future and life after death" ("African Traditional Religion in the Context of Christian and Islamic Encounter" 2020: 45). Nweke's perception revealed the pluralistic significant value of Nigerian dances and songs, globally, African ones. In this respect, it is worth arguing that the image of masquerade in *Purple Hibiscus* conveys multicolor hidden values that symbolize precolonial Nigerians' mode of living and values. Regrettably, this heritage bequeathed to the postcolonial African generation still goes through the domination of Western practices.

Though, *Purple Hibiscus* depicts the masquerade festival and stands as a defense of African identity it still need to fight hard to overcome Eurocentric oppressions. This Eurocentric oppression embodies negative prejudices and stereotypes about Afrocentricity. According to Samuel Burbanks, Afrocentricity "focuses on African agency, culture, history, philosophy, and society in an effort to reconstruct a global African identity and subjectivity" ("Afrocentricity" 2010: 12). In line with Burbanks's ideas, Adichie's piece of writing intends to reconstruct this African identity that has been victimized so long time ago. For example, Ifeoma's victory in sending Jaja and Kambili to the Aro festival indicates the quest for cultural identity but also urges, broadly, all Africans, specifically, Nigerians to know their history and cultural roots. This quest for identity is an evocation of the construction of African identity in *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie's narrative has a sense of cultural promotion rather than judging faiths, which

corroborates with the Afrocentric theorist Molefi Kete Asante's definition of Afrocentricity. Indeed, he argues that "Afrocentricity is a paradigm containing requirements for agency and subject placement for African people within the confines of African historical narratives; thus, moving Africans from the margins to the center in African discourse" (A.X. Smith, 2020: 212). Based on M. K. Asante's definition of Afrocentricity, Midas Chawane refers to Afrocentricity "as a manner of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate" ("The development of Afrocentricity: A historical survey", 79). For Chawane, Afrocentricity first of all is a strategy that intends to liberate Africans from mental slavery but also allows them to affirm their agency. This strategy is mostly implemented through in African literature. Thus, Adichie's imaginative work looks like a roadmap that helps her alienated and hybrid readers to regain their cultural pride and identity.

Another instance of festivity that indicates the African mode of living is how villagers gathered to celebrate the birth of Echewa's baby named Rapu in *Night Dancer*. Unlike Adichie who focuses on traditional festivals, Chika Unigwe deals with the traditional naming ceremony. Unigwe chronicles that when Echewa's wife put to bed a female baby, all the villagers gathered for a celebration. Despite Echewa's poor living conditions, people came to his home to rejoice with him as the storyteller reports:

In Lokpanta good news spread just as fast as bad. People were as eager to celebrate as they were to commiserate. News provided them with free drinks and a chance to contemplate the world. (...) They named her Big Mother and whispered messages for her to take to their ancestors. And the visitors were fed with what little Echewa had. And palm wine flowed and visitors drank and loosened their tongues and prayed for more blessings on the family who gave generously. (C. Unigwe, 2012: 135-136)

Through the above excerpt the authoress celebrates the spirit of communion/community in African culture but at the same time rejects the Western cultural paradigm based on individualism. In fact, her portrayal of Rapu's naming ceremony represents a traditional African practice that is today threatened by the mimicry of imported practices. In other words, Ungigwe teaches her readers about African cultural communism through her narrative. Indeed, she uplifts African cultural celebrations in order to create a cultural identification between the readers and her text.

In addition, the above excerpt from *Night Dancer* indicates the essence of African names. For instance, naming Rapu "Big Mother" embodies a symbolic message of satisfaction in the Igbo sociocultural context. This symbolic message wrapped in the name "big mother" or Rapu is a kind of plea to "the ill luck to go away and never return" (C. Unigwe, 2012: 137).



Unigwe further indicates that Rapu or Big Mother means “go away. A name that banished the ill luck to a hole deep enough to swallow it and keep it down. For as everyone knew, names had much influence on one’s future as the gods did” (C. Unigwe: 137). As depicted in the novel, the name Rapu given to the character requests supernatural forces to eradicate poverty and bring prosperity into the family. Actually, the name is not given to the character for an aesthetic purpose but for conveying a strong message of aid from the ancestors or gods. In investigating on African naming ceremony, the thinker Théophile Houndjo declares that African names are symbolic. Houndjo (2022, P. 44), affirms that “names [are] channels to convey messages” in African societies, especially, Nigerian society. He adds that names can be related to “tenderness, love,” “water,” and “the sun,” to name but these. Each name, he specifies, embodies a specific meaning that distinguishes it from another one. He indicates that names most often imply supernatural essence beyond people’s ordinary understanding.

Definitely, while exploring African festivities in the selected literary works this section teaches the reading audience on African cultural values. Indeed, it details the masquerade festivals and naming ceremonies in an African context, particularly the Nigerian one.

### **Conclusion**

The Afrocentric approach has given a deep insight into the question of Africanity in the selected novels. Indeed, the theory allows for discussing and understanding traditional African religions and different celebrations that shape people’s existence. Actually, both Nigerian authoresses Chika Unigwe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie while discussing African traditional beliefs and different festivities reconstruct African cultures. Through their realistic portrayal of Africanity, the African mode of living and belief, they promote African cultures and values, but also call on Africans all over the world to discover and appropriate their lost or forgotten identity.

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