



The Praxis of Artistry: Humour and Caricature in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

This study commenced by pointing out the lacuna that exists in stylistic and literary criticism and advocated for a balanced study in the areas of “what” and “how” in literary studies. The aim of this study which is the analysis of humour and caricature in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* was stated and one of the objectives of the study is to find out how the devices of humour and caricature can develop the themes of the novel. Tendency humour and caricature were propounded as frameworks for the analysis of humour and caricature in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. They were applied in the analysis of the sampled passages from the novel on humour and caricature. Some of the findings of the study are: Humour and caricature constitute elements that authenticate a work of art as an artistic and a literary work. They as well endow a literary work with the quality that makes it serve a corrective purpose.

Key word: Humour; Caricature; Style; Satire; Adichie; Theme; Characterisation

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INTRODUCTION

Critics such as Yankson (2008, p.iii), Ogenyi and Otagburuagu (2014, p.8) have lamented over the apathy among many critics in the area of style when compared

to the other aspects of literary texts such as themes, plots, characters, setting and ideology. They have observed that a lot need to be done in the area of stylistic criticism. The researcher shares the opinion of Yankson, Ogenyi and Otagburuagu, hence this present endeavour. Moreover, Osundare (1987, p.140) avers that dialectical relationship exists between form and content; between “what” and “how”. Therefore, there is the need for a balanced attention in the two areas of what and how in literary criticism. This partly informs and motivates the present research. Thus, this study aims at analyzing humour and caricature as elements of style and aspects of narrative techniques deployed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* to pass across her messages effectively to her audience.

Yakubu (2015) asserts that “African literature is generally protest bound. This is why its analysis could not be properly done under art for art’s sake philosophy.... In Africa, literature is a major agent of change” (p.77). In this study, the researcher is interested in analyzing humour and caricature in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* not only for their aesthetic quality but also to see how these features of style are employed to drive home the message of the novel. Therefore, the study shows the relationship between form and content. The researcher’s investigation is directed towards finding out how the devices of humour and caricature constitute the elements that make literature a major agent of change. To do this successfully, there is the need for some conceptual clarifications.

The researcher will commence this aspect of critical exercise by reviewing Abraham’s perspective on “Wit”, “Humour”, and “the Comic”. He observes that “at present both wit and humor designate species of the comic; that is, any element in a work of literature, whether a character, event, or utterance, which is designed to excite mirth in the reader or audience” (p.339). From the above position, the two terms: Wit and humour are similar and they are used for a similar purpose.

Abrams (2005) further observes that humour is ascribed to a comic utterance or to a comic appearance or mode of behavior. He distinguishes between humour and wit as follows: Wit, as we saw, is always intended by the speaker to be comic while a humorous saying is not cast in the neatly epigrammatic form of a witty saying. He continues with the distinction that "more important still is the difference that wit refers only to the spoken or written word, while humor has a much broader range of reference" (p.340). What the researcher considers pertinent as far as this study is concerned is that both wit and humour are suitable and applicable to the same situation and circumstances. It is in line with this that this study is putting forward a proposition that humour can be classified into two types like the classification of wit propounded by Sigmund Freud. Freud propounded two types of wit: tendency wit and harmless wit. He says that "harmless wit" evokes a laugh or smile that is without malice. 'Tendency wit' on the other hand is aggressive: it is derisive and derogatory turn of phrase, directing the laugh at a particular person or butt" (cited in Abrams, p.339). Similarly, harmless humour and tendency humour as proposed in this paper, appropriate Freud's definition of harmless wit and tendency wit.

Harmless humour and tendency humour as adopted in this study approximate harmless joke and tendentious joke which have been identified as two types of humour (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/humour> in Freud). Harmless humour and tendency humour will form a major tool for the analysis of humour in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Furthermore, it should be stressed that Freud's theory of humour which argues that "A benevolent superego allowed a light and comforting type of humor, while a harsh superego created a biting and sarcastic type of humor" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/humour> in Freud) is similar to the two types of humour proposed in this study which will provide the framework for the analysis of humour in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

According to Freud:

Tendency-wit is used with special preference as a weapon of attack or criticism of superiors who claim to be an authority. Wit then serves as a resistance against such authority and as an escape from its pressure. In this factor too lies the charm of caricature, at which we laugh even if it is badly done simply because we consider its resistance to authority a great merit (Freud, 2016, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. online).

The forms of humour and caricature in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* that serve as the author's resistance or criticism of an authority or superior will be analyzed as tendency humour or caricature.

Abrams (2005) further observed that:

One other point should be made about humor and the comic. In the normal use, the term humor refers to what is purely comic: It evokes, as it is sometimes said, sympathetic laughter, or else laughter which is an end in itself. If we extend Freud's distinction between harmless and tendency wit, we can say that

humor is a "harmless" form of the comic. There is, however, another mode of the comic that might be called "tendency comedy," in which we are made to laugh at a person not merely because he is ridiculous, but because he is being ridiculed – the laughter is derisive, with some element of contempt or malice, and serves as a weapon against its subject. (pp.340-341)

In the opinion of Abrams, tendency comedy and tendency wit are employed as satirical devices by writers. A position has been taken in this study that tendency humour and tendency caricature, like tendency wit are frameworks for the analysis of humour and caricature in the novel. Like tendency comedy identified by Abrams, they are potent satirical devices as we shall see in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. Humour and caricature as deployed by Adichie go beyond a linguistic attitude or a device that induces laughter in the audience as an end in itself to the level of an effective satirical device used as an instrument of change.

Abrams (2005) defined caricature as a verbal description (as in graphic art) which exaggerates or distorts, for comic effect, a person's distinctive physical features or personality traits (p.28). It should be categorically stated here that tendency caricature which the researcher intends to analyze in this study is mainly for its corrective measure. In this study, what we shall find apposite in the above definition is distortion of personality traits. In line with this, the researcher will try to find out some of Adichie's sarcastic expressions that produce the effect of caricature. Abrams has pointed out the etymology of sarcasm that: "Sarcasm derives from the Greek verb "sarkazein" to tear flesh" (p.143). As cutting, sneering, biting statement (Yakubu, 2015, p.91), sarcasm hurts like some forms of caricature. Like humour and wit, caricature is a species of humour. Fischer explains the relation between wit and the comic by the aid of caricature, which, according to his exposition, comes midway between the two (cited in Freud, online). This further justifies the appropriation of the term, "tendency" to caricature. Even though caricature induces laughter, it could be intended to hurt its target: The subject outside the world of literature that it desires to change.

All in all, the devices of humour and caricature endow literary work with artistic flavour. They are a mark of the writer's craftsmanship. They are features that constitute the imaginative and creative potentials of the language of literature which distinguish literature from other disciplines such as history, economics, journalism, science and technology, etc.. On the language and content of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, Akwanya (2005, p.143) comments that: "... the 'message' or 'content' as one component, which is balanced in the making of literature by a second component, which is an aesthetically pleasing language. And it is this language that distinguishes literature from the treatise, and so on". The artistic nature of a literary text requires the expertise knowledge of the critic for proper interpretation. The form

of language enunciated above approximates the formalist view which sees literature as primarily a specialized use of language. The linguistics of literature differs from the linguistics of practical discourse, because its laws are oriented toward producing the distinctive features called literariness (Abrams, 2005, p.107). But the present study in its orientation is opposed to the tenets of formalism that “conceives literary language to be self-focused, in that its function is not to convey information by making extrinsic references”. Contrary to this formalist position, this study intends to investigate Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* as a novel that is structured to condemn certain forms of behaviour in order to bring about a positive change to the Nigerian society.

1. TENDENCY HUMOUR AND CARICATURE IN ADICHIE’S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

In the novel, the tendency humour and caricature, sometimes containing sarcastic expressions which are biting and derisive are mainly directed at Papa (Eugene) and his household. They are also targeted at the Catholic, the government, economic situation, government institutions and private organizations. The analysis of tendency caricature that will be carried out in this study is in line with Yakubu and Ikrioku’s treatment of caricature in Chukwemka Ike’s *Our Children are Coming* which they say is “more than a device for comic effect.” They further say that their study “considers caricature in the novel as a device that enhances understanding of characters and reinforces the theme of the work.” Harmless humour and caricature on the other hand which is used to excite laughter without malice are mainly associated with Auntie Ifeoma and her household as well as Papa-Nukwu.

Papa is a character in the novel that personifies religious fanaticism. This attitude is caricatured. The novelist finds the attitude that is manifested in the following passages appalling, nauseating, and anathemic:

- (1) His line moved the slowest because he pressed hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash covered thumb and slowly, meaningfully enunciated every word of “dust onto dust you shall return” (p.11).
 - (2) Most people did not kneel to receive communion at the marble altar, with the blond life-size Virgin Mary mounted near by, but Papa did. He would hold his eyes shut so hard that his face tightened into a grimace, and then he would stick his tongue out as far as it could go (p.12).
 - (3) For twenty minutes he asked God to bless the food. Afterwards, he intoned the Blessed Virgin in several different titles...(p.11).
 - (4) For twenty minutes, Papa prayed for our protection from ungodly people and forces, for Nigeria and the Godless men ruling it... (p.69).
 - (5) Papa watched as we all sat down at the table, and then started grace. It was a little longer than usual, more than twenty minutes (p.104).
- The above passages portray religious fanaticism which is one of the themes of the novel. All the forms of attitude described above go beyond normal. Fanaticism in any form is a negative tendency. This negative tendency shows in: “slowest”, “pressed hard”, “hold his eyes shut, so hard...grimace”, “his tongue out as far as...”, and “started grace...more than twenty minutes”. All these forms of attitude so exhibited by the faithful are quite extraordinary and condemnable. Papa’s extraordinary behaviour also shows in the fence of his compound which is the highest in the neighbourhood. It is as high as the perimeter fence of Kirikiri Maximum prison in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the novelist’s disapproval of the attitude of overzealousness of Papa can also be seen in:

- (6) Later at dinner, Papa said we should recite sixteen different novenas. For Mama’s forgiveness. And on Sunday, the First Sunday of Trinity, we stayed back after Mass and started the novenas. ... If Papa felt Jaja or me beginning to drift off at the thirteenth recitation of the Plea to Saint Jude, he suggested we start all over. We had to get it right. I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for (pp.43-44).
- (7) Papa-Nukwu stopped, turned to look back towards our house “*Nekenem*, look at me. My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate...” (p.91).
- (8) “Has the devil asked you all to go on errands for him?”“has the devil built a tent in my house?” He turned to Mama. “You sit there and watch her desecrate the Eucharistic fast, *maka nnidi?*” He unbuckled his belt slowly.... It landed on Jaja first, across his shoulder. Then Mama raised her hands as it landed on her upper arm.... I put the bowl down just as the belt landed on my back....Papa was like a Fulani nomad—although he did not have their spare, tall body as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win (p.110).
- (9) You should not see sin and walk into it. He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it towards my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen....I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding. I felt nothing for a second. And then I screamed (p.201).

Papa's obsession with the doctrine is extraordinary and this extraordinary manner is caricatured in the above passages. His idea of sin, atonement, and forgiveness is exaggerated and ridiculed. The major devices that run through the four passages above to caricature Papa's idea of Christianity are irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration. Papa is educated but blind folded by his Christian belief. This myopia attributes the biological process of miscarriage suffered by Mama to a sin she has committed thus the novelist's disapproval as Papa's attitude can cause further psychological trauma to the poor woman. The narrator's doubt at the end of passage number 6 accentuates the satirical tone more so as the members' of his family are subjected to an incessant recitation of the Plea to St Jude.

Papa-Nukwu's regret in passage number 7 is a condemnation of the extremist principles with which Papa practises Christianity. Papa's fanaticism has caused members of his family both physical and psychological damage thus, the way he dies is not surprising to us.

Sarcasm is used in passage 8 to aptly describe Papa's fanaticism. To refer to breaking of Eucharist fast to swallow panadol because of a stomach ache a sin : running errands for the devil and desecrating Eucharist fast is a mockery of an ideal religion which upholds humanity, as it is concerned with human welfare and well being.

Papa sees his father as heathen and avoids him like a plague. He tortures his children for sharing the same roof with their grandfather when Auntie Ifeoma brings him to Nsukka at the time that Jaja and Kambili are spending their holidays with her. Papa's idea of sin and atonement as demonstrated in passage 9 is extraordinary, ridiculous, and absurd. This is a further condemnation of fanaticism. What is portrayed above is not religion but a terrorist act. Papa is therefore lampooned in the passage. We can see the anomalies that the above passages project and the need to change for the good of society and humanity in general.

Characterization through appearance is one of the methods employed by Adichie in the novel. The characters' physical features reveal them to us. A juxtaposition of Papa and Mama shows a grotesque physical relationship: strange and weird.

The following shows Papa's physical description which enhances characterization in the novel:

- (10) He lumbered upstairs, each heavy step creating turbulence in my head (p.47).
- (11) His buttocks quivered and shook like akamu, properly made akamu, jellylike (p.49).
- (12) Jaja swung open Papa-Nukwu's creaking wooden gate, which was so narrow that Papa might have to enter sideways if he ever were to visit (p.71).
- (13) Papa's white shirt, with its perfectly tailored lines, did little to minimize the mound of flesh that was his stomach (p.109).

- (14) Papa who was so tall that he sometimes lowered his head to get through doorways, that his tailor always used extra fabric to sew his trousers (p.213).

Papa's picturesque description confronts us with the sight of an extraordinary human physique: large, mountainous, awesome, weird, and overbearing. Papa's frame is strange and weird like his actions.

Mama on the other hand, is described as follows:

- (15) She limped slightly, as though one leg was shorter than the other, a gait that made her seem even smaller than she was (p.19).
- (16) Her brown face, flawless but for the recent jagged scar on her forehead, was expressionless (p.23).
- (17) She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts (p.28).
- (18) Then the piping voice would say, "Praise the Lord!" dragging out the first word as long as she could (p.30).
- (19) Her skin, usually the smooth brown of groundnut paste, looked like the liquid had been sucked out of it (p.38).

Mama's description presents to us a shrinking and emaciated figure. She is married to a man of substance but looks like a poorly fed orphan.

The description of Papa and Mama presents to us two characters that are completely opposite in action and physical features. The disharmony in their physical features is accentuated by their description that Mama is slung over Papa's shoulder like a juke sack of rice.

The differences in their physiques reflect in their actions so, one is not surprised at the resolution of the novel which is the poisoning of Papa by Mama leading to his death. This that is happening in a purported Christian home is a serious pinch of irony. Papa's mountainous size is reinforced by the patriarchal tyranny which he represents. No doubt, the description of these two unequal characters attract laughter but there is more to it as earlier explained.

Papa's physical stature is extraordinary like his practice of Christian faith which is also extraordinary. The physical and psychological deformity that members of his family suffer are because of his religious fanaticism which is his flaw and this leads to his doom. As a tragic character, Papa's story is a lesson to both Christian and non-Christian parents. Jaja has a gnarled finger like dried fish. Kambili is described by Amaka as *atulu* (sheep). To Amaka, her cousins (Jaja & Kambili) are not normal. Their father is responsible for their poor physical and psychological conditions.

Another important aspect of this research is tendency humour. There are situations and characters in the novel that generate tendency humour. Below are some of the passages of tendency humour:

- (20) The dining table was made of wood that cracked in dry weather. The outermost layer was shedding, like a molting cricket, brown slices curling up from the surface. The dining chairs were mismatched. Four were made of plain wood, the kind of chairs in my classroom, and the other two were black and padded (p.127).
- (21) Our water only runs in the morning, *o di egwu*. So we don't flush when we urinate, only when there is actually something to flush. Or sometimes, when the water does not run for days, we just close the lid until everybody has gone and then we flush with one bucket. It saves water (p.129).
- (22) The street she turned into was steep and she switched the ignition off and let the car roll, loose bolts rattling. "To save fuel" (p.136).
- (23) He was at home in Auntie Ifeoma's house; he knew which chair had a protruding nail and could pull a thread off your clothes (p.143).
- (24) Food had little meat, each person's piece the width of two fingers pressed close together and the length of half a finger (p.148).
- (25) They were all about my age, with shorts that have holes in them and shirts washed so often I didn't know what colour they had originally and some crusty spots from insect bites on their legs (p.184).
- (26) They were the taller, older versions of the boys I had seen the last time; their hole-ridden shorts were just as worn and their shirts just as threadbare (p.230).
- (27) "Obiora, please kill" this chicken and put it in the freezer before it loses weight, since there's nothing to feed it (p.239).
- (28) "I just can't afford milk anymore"... "you should see how the price of dried milk rise every day, as if somebody is chasing them" (p.238).
- (29) "We cannot afford to eat meat. We cannot afford bread. So your child steals and you turn to him in surprise?" (p.248).

Every passage above speaks clearly of bad leadership in Nigeria. All the passages indict Nigerian leaders of maladministration. The poor are living in abject poverty while the rich are getting richer. The hardship that the middle and low income earners pass through is couched in the above passages. All the passages speak volume of the poor economic condition of the country. Inflation and poverty are symptoms of failed leadership. The above passages speak eloquent of the hardship encountered in Nigeria. Nigeria is one of the world leading producers of oil yet her citizens face an incessant fuel scarcity resulting in the hike of prices of commodities and transport fares. Motorists sleep in cubs all night that they are bitten by mosquitoes to develop bumps as big as cashew nuts. Fuel

has become so scarce that sucking from the car in which it is available has become a skill. The above passages reveal the mediocrity that surrounds the Nigerian government.

Adichie uses some of the passages above to criticize the Nigerian society that gives room for poverty and even allows it to multiply. The children of the poor drop out of school because of their inability to pay school fees. This insensitivity with its accompanying lack of responsibility has been criticized for a positive change. Unlike Adichie's tendency caricature that is directed at religious fanaticism, her tendency humour is directed at the Nigerian government.

2. HARMLESS HUMOUR IN ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Palmer defines humour as "everything that is actually or potentially funny, and the process by which this funniness occurs" (p.3). The analysis of harmless humour in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* that will be done in this study is in tandem with Palmer's definition. The passages that will be analyzed as harmless humour are those that evoke laughter as an end in themselves. They are neither harsh nor aggressive and they are not intended to hurt anybody. They are not designed to effect a change. Even though there are instances of harmless caricature in the novel, only harmless humour is of interest to the researcher and this will be analyzed here. The passages of harmless humour that will be analyzed shortly are mainly associated with Papa-Nukwu and Ifeoma. Some of these passages are:

- (30) "What are these children saying, *gbo*, Ifeoma?" Papa-Nukwu asked. "Are they conspiring to share my gold and my lands?" (p.90).
- (31) Papa-Nukwu chuckled. "Then my spirit will haunt you when I join my ancestors." "It will haunt Eugene first." "I joke with you, *nwa m* (p.91)
- (32) "He says tablets are bitter, but you should taste the kola nuts he chews happily—they taste like bile" (p.164).
- (33) "*Odi ma*. But you have not told me how those people in the TV climb into it" (p.165).
- (34) "... He said he is not sure which happened first, hearing the teeth of the crocodiles snapping or discovering that he had wet his trousers" (p.178).
- (35) I wanted to turn and go away, to leave her with her grief. But my underwear already felt wet, and I had to move my weight from leg to leg to hold the urine back (p.192).

To have associated light and harmless humour with Papa-Nukwu and Ifeoma shows that the novelist approves their activities as portrayed in the novel. No wonder Papa-Nukwu unlike Papa (Eugene) dies smiling. None of the passages above is couched with bad intention. None

has satirical barb. They are meant to induce laughter as an end. The word "joke" as rightly used in one of the passages is from the subconscious mind and therefore spontaneous. All the jokes intended in the above passages are genuine, light, and harmless. The joke stated in one of the passages as well as others that we can deduce in the sampled passages is not tendentious and harsh.

Furthermore, apart from pleasure that can be derived, the excised passages reveal to us certain qualities that some of the characters are endowed with. Papa-Nukwu and Ifeoma have a good sense of humour; but Papa's speech is bereft of this. This quality possessed by Papa-Nukwu and Ifeoma attracts children to them and they love them as demonstrated by Kambili, Jaja and the other children. Papa does not possess the attributes of Papa-Nukwu and Ifeoma. The inability to use light humour contributes to his tragic fall. This explains one of the literary functions of harmless humour in the novel.

CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

In this study, tendency caricature, tendency humour, and harmless humour are the aspects of caricature and humour analyzed to reveal the author's message or theme. The analysis of caricature and humour in the novel also shows Adichie's craftsmanship and the aesthetic quality of her novel. All these make her novel a work of literary monument and a master piece. Even though enough has been done in this study, the researcher is circumscribed by space as he is unable to analyze every passage of tendency caricature and humour as well as harmless humour and caricature. Moreover, the same reason is responsible for the inability to make copious comparison with other novels that employ humour and caricature as devices such as Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *Devil on the Cross*, Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*, *Poor Christ of Bomba*, and so on. To all these novels, tendency caricature and humour as well as harmless humour can be applied as theoretical frameworks.

Adichie is a humourist who has displayed a great deal of craftsmanship as a novelist. She has displayed mastery in the use of humour and caricature not only as stylistic devices to induce laughter but also as a means of developing the theme of the novel.

Humour and caricature as deployed by Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* reveal the artistic, creative, and imaginative use of language which is one of the characteristics of literature. The findings of this study are:

- (a) Humour and caricature are important means of characterization through appearance.
- (b) They are devices that develop the themes of the novel.
- (c) They reveal the nature of literature and distinguish it from other disciplines.
- (d) They enhance aesthetic quality of the novel.
- (e) Tendency caricature and humour are realistic and workable aspects of the theory of humour.
- (f) Humour and caricature are potent satirical barbs that can make people conscious of criticism and therefore, the tendency to adapt and change for good.

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