

Food and Social Difference in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie

**Dr. K. Sindhu, Assistant Professor of English
K. Lydia, II M.A. English Literature**

=====
The paper focuses on the food in the social class that assists people to realize the different manners followed in various classes during dining. All aspects from the cooking to eating vary in all methods. The upper class follows strict etiquettes and has servants for cooking and serving while the lower class does not have servants and enjoy cooking and serving by themselves which follows etiquettes not strictly but according to their contentment. This aspect of cooking and dining foods can be traced in the novel *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie through various Nigerian cuisines. In the novel *Purple Hibiscus*, there are two different class families. The family of Kambili is depicted as the upper class and that family of her Aunt Ifeoma as lower class.

In the upper class family of Kambili, dining takes place as a ritual following strict etiquette. Sisi is the servant who cooks the food and also arranges the dishes in the dining table in a sensible way. Kambili explains the arrangement as “Sisi had set eight places at the dining table, with wide plates the color of caramel and matching napkins ironed into crisp triangles” (PH 92). Everybody in the family sits in their respective places at the dining table; Kambili and his brother Jaja sit opposite to their father.

The father of Kambili usually tells the grace of the meal for twenty minutes and prays for a variety of titles intoned to Blessed Mary. After the prayer, they ate silently and Kambili describes it as “silence hung over the table like the blue-black clouds in the middle of rainy season” (PH 32). During the dining, if there is any need for service or any drinks Kambili mother calls Sisi by pressing the ringer that is dangled above the table on a transparent wire from the ceiling and she appears to fulfill their needs. After eating, nobody is allowed to leave, and the children express their gratitude by saying thank you lord, thank you papa and thank you mama and fold their arms and they wait for everyone to finish their meal. The father of Kambili again prays after the meal.

In the family of Kambili, this is the usual dining ritual that takes place and it slightly changes during the vacation for Christmas to Abba. They carry their foodstuffs like bags of rice, garri, beans, vegetables, cartons of juice and also huge iron tripods. The wives of Umunna come to their home in order to make the cooking for all the guests. Sisi provides them with salt and all utensils. The family of Kambili always had dishes like fufu, jollof rice, onugu soup, egusi soup and azu. They had enough quantity of food and always had cool drinks and wine with their meals. Kambili and Jaja are brought up with the strict etiquette and they follow the table manners. It can be witnessed by the question of Amaka “do you always eat rice with fork and a knife and napkins?” (PH 97).

The family of Aunt Ifeoma is not privileged as the family of Kambili and she leads a common life with her children Amaka, Obiora, and Chima who are depicted as lower class and she does the cooking and is helped by Amaka and her sons to set the table. Later she invites Kambili and Jaja to her home in Nsukka. Kambili and Jaja visit their home with yams, rice and also gas cylinders. There is scarcity of gas cylinders in Nsukka and the mother of Kambili sends it through them. Ifeoma welcomes Kambili and Jaja warmly and tells that “today we’ll treat Kambili and Jaja as guests, but from tomorrow they will be family and join in the work” (PH 119).

Kambili is upset to see the uneven arrangement of the table and explains that the table was made of wood that cracked in dry weather and the dining chairs were mismatched as four were made of plain wood and the other two chairs were black and padded. Ifeoma said the grace for few minutes and Kambili still closed her eyes and then Ifeoma informs her that the prayer is finished, and they do not say mass in the name of grace like her father with a chuckle. Kambili could not concentrate on eating the jollof rice and tried to focus but saw that the plates were mismatched. Kambili was surprised to watch the conversation and thought that they would not speak or indulge in a conversation without purpose in her home, especially at the table, but here her cousins seemed to keep on speaking. Kambili did not speak but listened to every word spoken and followed every cackle of laughter and mockery.

Kambili was sensing the change of atmosphere and compared the foods at her home and she started to suffer due to the new experience and thought that her parents would be sitting alone in the wide dining table and they always had leftover rice and chicken. The crates of coke, fanta and sprite were always full at her home. At the home of Ifeoma they also had dinner watching TV in the living room and that was totally strange to Kambili and Jaja as they had not risen from the dining table during meals.

Kambili noticed that Aunt Ifeoma dissolved spoons of dried milk in cold water in order to give the children. She used to have as much creamy peak milk. They had breakfast as okpa and Kambili knew that they never had it for any meals and ate it as snacks along with steam cooked cowpea and palm oil caked. Kambili and Jaja adopted themselves to the etiquettes and Kambili realized that:

Laughter always rang into Aunt Ifeoma's house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping. Food had little meat, each person's piece the width of two fingers pressed close together and the length of half a finger. The flat always sparkled Amaka scrubbed the floors with a stiff brush, Obiora did the sweeping, chima plumped up the cushions on the chairs. Everybody took turns washing plates. (PH 140)

Kambili and Jaja appreciated the works that was done by the children of Ifeoma and also accepted the change and took part in the various chores.

Kambili and Jaja returned home. During dinner, kambili realized that the chunk of chicken on her plate would be divided into three pieces at Aunt Ifeoma house. She also felt that the silent was different and missed the conversation of her cousins at the table. She learned about companionship and unity of doing the work dividing it among family members in order to eat a meal with happiness. The performing of different works helped Kambili and Jaja to recognize their own capacity and responsibility.

To conclude, Kambili from the upper class family realized that they follow strict etiquettes, have servants and perform dining as a ritual. They have enough quantity and quality of food and do not share happiness and laughter with the family members. In Aunt Ifeoma's family, she finds that true happiness is not in the quantity or quality of food but in sharing the works like cooking and eating together as a family. Through the character of Kambili everyone can learn that following strict table manners and having various dishes will never give happiness but cooking, serving, sharing the food and treating etiquette according to the comfort of all the members and working and talking together as a family will reflect the love, care and will create ecstasy during dining.

Works Cited

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019
Editors: Dr. V. Sangeetha, Dr. B. J. Geetha, Dr. K. Sindhu, Dr. S. Boopathi and Ms. S. Snekhya Sri
Food in Literature: Papers Presented in National Seminar on Food in Literature, 2019
Dr. K. Sindhu, Assistant Professor of English and K. Lydia, II M.A. English Literature
Food and Social Difference in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie 291

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. Harper Perennial, 2004.

Dr. K. Sindhu
Assistant Professor of English
Department of English
Periyar University
Salem –11

K. Lydia
II M.A. English Literature
Periyar University
Salem –11
Email ID – lydiaprincyrose@gmail.com