

Review of Chris Abani's *Graceland* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, published in *Wasafiri* 45 (Summer 2005), pp. 81-83.

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Graceland

Chris Abani

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York,
2004, hb

339PP ISBN 0374165890 \$24.00

www.fsgbooks.com

Purple Hibiscus

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Anchor Books New York, 2004, pb

320PP ISBN 14000 7694 3 \$13.00

www.randomhouse.com

For at least two decades, the tendency among literary critics has been to measure the work of all up-and-coming Nigerian novelists against the achievements of such illustrious compatriots as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka and the Booker Prize winner Ben Okri. This is not surprising in view of the high standards established by these celebrated authors. In fact, the two novels considered here, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Chris Abani's *Graceland*, may be reminiscent of Achebe and Okri respectively. But this comparison need not turn to the disadvantage of the newer generation, for in recent years Nigeria has seen the emergence of several talented writers who have skilfully cast their predecessors' subject matter into a contemporary mould, thereby managing to find their own distinctive voice.

Even though Chris Abani may be associated with this group of young authors, he is not a newcomer to the literary scene. He has published several collections of poems, among which is the haunting *Kalakuta Republic* (2000), inspired by his experience as a political prisoner. Moreover, although *Graceland* was marketed as a 'dazzling debut' by its publisher, it is actually Abani's third novel – his two previous ones came out in Nigeria in the 1980s, but censorship and persecution by the military authorities at the time caused them to remain largely unknown to Western audiences.

Abani's *Graceland*, like Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, features an adolescent who is trying to come to terms with the corrupt and violent society of postcolonial Nigeria, but the worlds of the novels' central characters seem to diverge beyond these general traits. While Adichie's Kambili is the daughter of a wealthy Catholic businessman who keeps his household under a tyrannical rule, Abani's Elvis roams unsupervised through the poorer

neighbourhoods of Lagos. It is precisely against the decaying setting of Maroko, a swampy slum in the former capital of Nigeria, where Elvis lives with his widowed father, the latter's girlfriend and her three children, which *Graceland* opens. The young man, named after the American icon Elvis Presley, one of his late mother's favourite singers, tries to eke out a living by doing impersonations of the King for tourists, but financial pressures soon force him to set his dream of becoming a professional dancer aside and find a more lucrative job. Weary of the tense relationship with his alcoholic father and his spiteful mother-in-law, the sixteen-year-old spends most of his time outside his home with his friend Redemption and the enigmatic Caesar, a vagrant nicknamed 'The King of the Beggars'.

The city of Lagos, where a great part of the story unfolds, is so vividly described that it almost becomes a character in its own right: 'half slum, half paradise' (p 7), it is devastated by poverty and violence, yet boasts luxurious residences, colourful markets and *bukas* throbbing to the rhythm of reggae and high life music. The novel's urban episodes, set in 1983, are interspersed with flashbacks from Elvis's childhood and early teenage years in Afikpo, ranging from the late stages of his mother Beatrice's illness to the abrupt end of his father's budding political career. These narrative sequences are padded with recipes, descriptions of medicinal plants, religious texts and even an extract from a popular Onitsha Market romance; each chapter also starts with two detailed descriptions of an aspect of the Igbo kola nut ritual. All these transitory sections add to the book's fragmentary structure and mirror the novel's emotional complexity, for some passages can be assumed to be extracts from Beatrice's diary, while others echo or obliquely anticipate episodes in the protagonists' lives. Supported by this sophisticated structural organisation, the evolution of Abani's main character is remarkably convincing, chiefly because the author avoids the pitfall of either putting his hero on a moral pedestal or having him sink into mindless debauchery. If anything, it is with the depiction of Elvis's grandmother, Oye, that one might find fault: an uneducated woman with a rural background, she speaks English with a Scottish accent, picked up from the missionaries she used to work for. Even though she does not master the language's idiomatic expressions, she addresses everyone, including her daughter and grandchild, in the colonial tongue instead of her native Igbo. Equally difficult to believe is the fact that the illiterate old lady has a series of penfriends all over the world and asks Elvis to read out their letters to her and write her replies.¹ Admittedly, the correspondence between Oye and her foreign friends provides the context for humorous incidents, since the mischievous Elvis devises tricks to keep the money his grandmother gives him to stamp her letters. These

¹ Thanks to Chika Unigwe for bringing these facts to my attention (personal communication).

occasional touches of humour wonderfully balance with the book's more tragic content, as some of the events described in *Graceland* are overwhelmingly brutal and distressing. Despite this violence, the narrative does not try to find its power in the sensational; rather, it renders the characters' ordeal with extraordinary sensitivity.

This comment also applies to *Purple Hibiscus*. With several literary prizes to its credit, including the prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book, Adichie's novel has been one of the few in recent years to combine popular success and critical acclaim. Rightly so, for the book is outstandingly written, from its sensuous evocations of the local flowers and foods to its incisive description of the excesses brought about by religious fanaticism.

The opening section propels the reader into the middle of a family dispute, provoked by Kambili's brother's refusal to take communion on Palm Sunday. Only after describing the tensions between father and son, and thus subtly arousing our curiosity as to the ins and outs of the uneasiness, does the narrator progressively unveil the events that have led to the incident. It is through the voice of Kambili that the four members of the Achike family are portrayed. The father, Eugene, is an affluent Igbo businessman with a multifaceted personality that can only be captured in a series of paradoxes: he fights the yoke of military dictatorship in Nigeria by publishing a pro-democracy newspaper, but he repeatedly beats his wife and his two children. A staunch Catholic, he makes huge donations to the local church but displays very little of this generosity towards his father, a follower of traditional Igbo religion, to whom he repeatedly refers as a 'heathen'.

In the Achikes' luxurious home, outbursts of paternal anger alternate with stretches of oppressive silence. Scenes of domestic violence are often described in a hushed tone, as fifteen-year-old Kambili tries to repress any awareness of the beatings her father regularly inflicts on her mother:

I was in my room ... when I heard the sounds. Swift, heavy thuds on my parents' handcarved bedroom door. I imagined the door had gotten stuck and Papa was trying to open it. If I imagined it hard enough, then it would be true. (pp 32-33)

Kambili and her brother Jaja temporarily escape the suffocating atmosphere of their home when they are invited by their Auntie Ifeoma to spend a few days in Nsukka. A widowed university lecturer, the latter lives in a small apartment with her three children and cannot even afford to buy milk, which eloquently illustrates the precarious status of intellectuals in Nigeria. Despite these financial challenges, Ifeoma's flat resounds with chatter and laughter;

and the family's prayers, punctuated with Igbo songs, provide Kambili and Jaja with an alternative model to their father's austere religious recitations. Above all, the Achike children's brief stay in Nsukka gives them a new-found sense of serenity, symbolised by their aunt's rare purple hibiscus, 'fragrant with the undertones of freedom' (p 16).

The novel's intensity is, at least partly, achieved by the author's judicious choice of narrative perspective, as the events are refracted through the prism of the first person narrator, Kambili. This provides the reader with a detailed reflection of the girl's emotional state of mind but also, inevitably, hinders access to any objective facts that would give one a comfortable all-encompassing viewpoint. For instance, Kambili's candid description of her crush on Father Amadi, a young Catholic priest whom she meets in Nsukka, is at times overly naïve but perfectly in line with her psychological state. Importantly, the adolescent's platonic love for the clergyman is a crucial step in an ongoing process of emancipation, rendered all the more forceful by the heroine's first-hand account.

Both *Purple Hibiscus* and *Graceland* are impressive novels. Adichie's and Abani's narratives explore completely different universes with great sensitivity, and the authors' stylistic qualities, barely touched upon here, are other notable features which, in time, may well prompt critics and readers to welcome these two writers into the Nigerian canon.