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**TRAGIC HEROES AND UNHOLY ALLIANCES: A READING OF CHIMAMANDA  
NGOZI ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS AND MARIAMA BA'S SO LONG A LETTER.**

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**Abstract:** *Religious and Secular powers have for centuries been contentious issues that affect the lives of human beings either positively or negatively depending on human responses to them. Literature abounds with characters who have responded in various ways to the dictates of religious and secular institutions. While some characters have learnt from and achieved a better understanding of human existence in their religious and secular interactions, others have been destroyed by such adherence. Of particular interest are fanatics, religious or traditional, and what happens to them and the societies to which they belong. The interest in the consequences of fanaticism or wrong emphasis have spurred this writer into an analysis of Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus and Mariama Ba's So long a Letter, from the perspective of the impact that religious and traditional values have on the individual psyche. One discovers that the two writers proffer a warning that excessive adherence, rather than enhance progress can bring about chaos and the destruction of individual psyche and societal harmony.*

**Keywords:** Tragic heroes, Alliances, Purple Hibiscus

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In our layman's understanding, a hero is a man of exceptional qualities who wins our admiration through noble and selfless deeds, especially of courage. In Literature, a hero or heroine is conceived of as the male or female character of a play or a novel around whom the action revolves and in whose fate we the audience or reader's get sympathetically involved and/or identify with.

"Tragedy" from the classical perspective refers to the fall of a king or person of noble birth through actions or circumstances beyond his control. Today, however, the term "Tragedy" is loosely applied to the downfall, suffering or death of a dignified individual as a result of fate or error of judgment. "Tragedy" could also arise from natural circumstances including moral or psychological weakness of the character or even societal decadence. Heroism would thus, relate to deeds of extreme courage or actions of a hero or heroine that are extraordinary or larger than life and deserve commendation or applause as the case may be.

It is from our general understanding of these terms that one attempts an analysis of the major characters or protagonists in Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Mariama Ba's *So long a Letter* with a view to reveal them either as people of exceptional quality who deserve our admiration and emulation or commendation or conversely as people who exhibit anti heroic or unheroic qualities that pitch them against normal human appreciation.

The writer also attempts to view the protagonists of these works as tragic heroes pitched against unholy alliances between religions on the one hand and traditional or secular norms in an evolving society which is responding to the throbs of development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From the two works of art under study, one perceives two very powerful institutions at play and the super adherents of each pitched against each other in a power play to justify their actions.

The institutions here are the Church or Religion on the one hand, and Tradition or secular society on the other. Adichie's work is set purely within the dictates of the very powerful Roman Catholic Faith, while Ba's revolves around the equally powerful Islamic Faith. However, this write up is not concerned with the unnecessary antagonism generated by so called fanatical adherents of these two religions. Of interest instead, is the consequence of fanatical adherence to religion on the individual and to society represented by traditional norms and expectations.

Set against the background of political upheaval in Nigeria, Ngozi Adichie's work explores the dynamics of a family ruled by an extremist Catholic fundamentalist Patriarch whose word is Law. His view of life is governed by Catholic tenets enunciated by white colonialists, and conspicuously stands against the customs, religion and traditional or cultural norms that govern the traditional Nigerian or Igbo society. Eugene Achike, the pivot around whom the entire action of the novel revolves practices Catholicism according to his colonialist or white priests dictates and not in accordance with biblical injunctions which prescribe honour and respect for parents and elders so he is able to reject his Father whom he tags a "heathen" and thus not worthy of association. Eugene thus becomes an acolyte to western values, and is bereft of his own traditional African values represented by his Father. To westerners and western culture, he is a hero who upholds their values, but to the African or Traditional Igbo man he is certainly unheroic and can only be described as an epitome of neo-colonialism. To the average reader, Eugene is not only hypocritical and thus unheroic, but is also a chauvinist who uses religion as ploy for domination of his wife and entire family. He refuses his wife many things, including freedom of association and even procreation as he severally beats her to the point of miscarriages. The children are not spared the brutality or violence as Jaja, his son, has a finger mutilated by him and Kambili, his daughter, is hospitalized in a coma for keeping a drawing of her supposed "heathenist" grandfather.

Eugene is thus a fanatic, so obsessed with his religion that he takes notice of no one including his own sister Ifeoma who incidentally is more realistic and possesses a stronger personality than him.

Several incidents portray Eugene as an unheroic, blind and hypocritical fanatic. We are first introduced to a family disintegrating in the face of the high handedness of a man who sticks to old ways even when he is wrong. He refuses to understand why his son Jaja did not go for communion. To him, communion must be taken by his followers irrespective of their state of preparedness which is in fact, against the Catholic doctrine. He accepts the singing of the "Credo" in Latin instead of Igbo as normal; accepts praises from the Rev. Father in the pulpit as higher donor, and for paying for cartons of Altar wine; he occupies a conspicuous front seat in the Church and sees all of these as normal. However, when a young African Priest introduces an innovation at Mass which could enhance total participation or even Africanize the Mass, he is the first to criticize the Priest when he observes:

- That young Priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal Churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the Church. We must remember to pray for him... (*Purple Hibiscus* P.29)

The entire family lives in fear under the iron grip of a decidedly hypocritical father who wants his children to excel over others, and so controls an empire of riches which he happily doles out to chosen people who pay him homage, and for the advancement of his ideological viewpoint yet he fails to respect his own father, a traditionalist whom he tags a “heathen”. He is a father who would bring up his children to adore White Catholic priests and their views and adhere strictly to Catholic doctrine that came from white Rev. Father’s, but could not let his children spend time with their grandfather to learn traditional wisdom of his fore fathers.

The work is suffused with a pervading sense of hypocrisy in which Eugene, a self acclaimed advocate of freedom and equality in the Nation governs his own family as a despot and is feared by all. His daughter, Kambili, freezes when she hears her Father’s footsteps and when her aunty, Ifeoma, speaks to her Father off-handedly she observes:

- Every time aunty Ifeoma spoke to Papa my heart stopped, then started again in a hurry. It was the flippant tone; she did not seem to recognize that it was Papa, that he was different, special.
- I wanted to reach out and press her lips shut and get some of that shiny bronze lipstick on my fingers...( *Purple Hibiscus* p.77).
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The family compound itself is an epitome of a prison yard with high walls topped by electrical cables permitting no entry by outsiders. In this way, the children are secluded and become recluses and social misfits, finding it difficult to relate with their cousins. Kambili is almost a dumb cat and so is teased by her friends who think she is a snob, and even her cousin Amaka. It takes several urgings from Aunty Ifeoma before she finally talks back at Amaka who is surprised and even pleased that Kambili responded to her teasing. They have no friends, cannot listen to secular music, and have no time to watch TV. Their lives are dominated by Prayer and reading school books. They have no time to play or appreciate a natural environment, so Jaja is enthralled by aunty Ifeoma’s garden, but he does not even know a hibiscus flower. In fact, the children even had a schedule drawn up for them by Papa on their visit to their aunty Ifeoma’s house. Of course aunty Ifeoma knew better and had to seize the schedule to allow the children freedom to play and associate, at least, during the holiday.

- “Eugene gave you a schedule to follow when you are here? Nekwanu anya, what does that mean?”...
- “I will keep them for you until you leave” ( *Purple Hibiscus* P.124)

The only weak attempt at a revolt from this excessive control comes from Jaja who is already a rebel at the beginning of the novel but we are told he paid for it with a mutilated finger. We only glimpse at his rebellious attitude when his mother sometimes has to smuggle food to him in his room.

Aunty Ifeoma’s attempt to let the children breathe secular freedom is not very successful as they are still under the fear of phone calls from their father whom they fear would perceive their corruption by unfaithful people. Yet, Ifeoma’s Catholicism is more realistic than Eugene’s and she sarcastically refers to this when she observes:

- “Nne we have finished praying. We do not say Mass in the name of grace like your father does”.
- Aunty Ifeoma said with a chuckle. ( *Purple Hibiscus* P.119)
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This is the picture of a family that fails to actualize because their father would only permit them to go on religious pilgrimages; a family going through a traumatic experience of their inability to gain social freedom as a result of the patriarch's archaic religious fanaticism. His tyrannical devotion to archaic Catholicism not only destabilizes his family emotionally and physically but also lays the foundation for his tragic end. His own perceived heroism in the spread and advocacy of a foreign religion which he himself does not even understand comes to nought. In the end, he struggles to hide his own emotional and cultural malformation in his excessive show of patriarchal control of his family which falls short of modern societal development. The family's release is finally achieved when Eugene's wife poisons him and in a show of solidarity and relief at his death, Jaja the rebel claims responsibility for the action to save his mother. Jaja thus becomes the family's scapegoat, the sacrificial lamb who suffers physical and psychological pain for the release of the family.

Eugene's extremist tendency therefore, maps him out for tragic destruction. He is seen as a tragic figure or hero upholding the decadent tenets of colonial Catholicism which even today are disintegrating in the face of inculturation. His inability to adjust and break away from his inheritance from the colonial Rev. Fathers, pitches him against his own traditional Igbo society represented by his Father Papa Nnukwu. Interestingly, it is this father's resilience in his acceptance of the white man's way of life, even if partially, that affords Eugene the position he now occupies. Ngozi Adichie's sympathy with Papa Nnukwu is apparent as she subtly presents him as more acceptable and of more heroic qualities than his son. Papa Nnukwu's superiority over his son underlies the superiority of Igbo Traditional culture over imported or outdated Christianity or Catholicism which Eugene represents. Papa Nnukwu's death is celebrated. He departs in the presence of all his grand children and his daughter Ifeoma who gives him a befitting burial, to which even Eugene contributes. On the other hand, Eugene with his archaic principles of Catholicism dies uncelebrated, un-mourned. His death is the freedom of society from the likes of him. Eugene's inability to imbibe change destroys his family and heightens his own tragedy.

The other characters of the novel apart from aunt Ifeoma and her family and close friends are almost non-existent. Eugene's wife and children are too docile to receive any notice from the reader except of course Jaja who displays flashes of rebellion and growth but even this is daunted by his father's overbearing personality. Challenges to Eugene's excesses come only from his father Papa Nnukwu who bluntly refuses to succumb to his son's wishes to become a Catholic and abandon his traditional way of life, and his sister Ifeoma who sees him as a lost sheep or the unheeding fly that follows the corpse to the grave.

We perceive an unholy alliance as we see Eugene's extremism in his religious affiliation which is inevitably pitched against traditional norms that bind his society together. He immediately becomes an outcast, whose tragedy is mapped out by his confrontational stance with secular tradition. His savior would have been his down to earth and realistic sister, Ifeoma whom he also antagonizes. Papa Nnukwu's cultural or traditional religion, as well as Ifeoma's secularism is totally unacceptable to Eugene. He only allows Jaja and Kambili fifteen minutes with their grandfather, while only the lure of a pilgrimage to Aokpe gets him to allow them a visit to his sister at Nsukka.

Yet, Eugene is inextricably linked to Papa Nnukwu and Ifeoma, a relationship he cannot but would have gladly severed; a relationship he must inevitably maintain to be relevant in society. He is a Nigerian only by blood, as a son to Papa Nnukwu. In thought and actions, he is dead to his Igbo society and his kindred except by feeding those who cringe on him during Christmas

and other such feasts. This further heightens his tragedy and reduces his heroic qualities. This is so especially when one sees that even this feeding is restricted to those who belong to the same Catholic Faith as he. Traditional members of the kindred family were not welcome as he refers to them as “heathens”. For this he condemns his children to prayer for spending 25 minutes instead of 15 in Papa Nnukwu’s house. As if 15 minutes is not enough for desecration. His reception of Anikwena, an elderly visitor in his house is further proof of his intolerance of so called “heathens”. Kambili the narrator reports:

- Papa was standing in the front yard near an orange tree, screaming at a wrinkled old man in a torn white singlet and a wrapper round his waist...
- “What is Anikwena doing in my house? What is a worshipper of idols doing in my house? Leave my house!” (*Purple Hibiscus* P.69)

The helpless old man, in the face of this shameful disgrace resorts to invoking Igbo traditional norms of respect for elders but this is of no relevance to Eugene who is dead to culture and who insists that he must leave.

- “Do you know that I am in your father’s age group, gbo?” The old man asked. (*Purple Hibiscus* P.70).

The old man’s final retort sums up Eugene’s lack of belonging in his traditional norms and confirms Ifeoma’s fears about her brother’s damnation. It portrays him as a social misfit destined for an unheroic or tragic fall. The old man warns:

- “Ifukwa gi! You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave”

This old man’s statement sums up Eugene’s entire life as a tragic figure operating within an unholy alliance of religion versus culture and tradition, two forces which place him in a disadvantaged position because of his training. His life is tragic because he has refused to learn or to adjust with the times. Eugene is more archaic than his traditionalist father who adjusted to accommodate the colonial religion. As a modernist Eugene is still a failure, and to this extent his tragedy is of his own making. He therefore lacks sympathy as a man who champions the cause of an ideology. The fact that he is poisoned by his wife does not solicit sympathy from us; rather we are relieved to hear that he is dead.

Conversely, as earlier noted, Papa Nnukwu’s end in the presence of his grand children and his daughter Ifeoma marks the triumph of traditionalism over imported cultural values represented by Eugene and his archaic brand of Catholicism.

On the other hand, we sympathize with Ifeoma for losing her job and are anxious about her future with the children but we know she will relocate to America. With her there is no fear of bastardisation as she and her children have drunk of Papa Nnukwu’s well of traditional wisdom. Only Eugene and his family are closeted in his self imposed hell as Kambili points out that the silence in their house is akin to the end of time.

In the second work of art under consideration, Mariama Ba’s *So long a Letter*, the concepts of tragic heroism and unholy alliances are not perceived from the perspective of a single dominant patriarchal character as is the case with Eugene Achike in *Purple Hibiscus*. Although there is an unholy alliance between Islam and traditional society manifested in aunty Nabou’s decision to rear another wife for her son who is of noble birth, and in Modou’s decision to marry another wife against the wishes of their first wives who are educated and modern, the situations are not

exactly the same. In *So long a Letter*, the institutionalization of patriarchy is in the doctrine of religion, here, Islam which allows for a male dominated society that subjugates its female counterparts. Here, the two institutions of religion and tradition seem to connive against the wishes and aspirations of the female protagonists. The consequences are equally devastating as they leave individuals emotionally and psychologically emasculated and devoid of self actualization. The characters also become tragic heroes whose vision of societal advancement is curtailed, and their personal lives stunted or they are subjected to death. In a very subtle but revealing narrative, Mariama Ba articulates the consequences of such institutionalization not only on the woman but also on the man who unwittingly saps his energy through multiple marriages and gradually grinds his resources to an end and becomes a recluse or tragic personality unto himself. The decisions taken by men in such situations affect the people who operate within that patriarchal set-up much in the same way as Eugene's chauvinistic behaviour towards his family and society had on them. They render those under them, particularly the womenfolk incapable of developing their potentials to contribute to the growth of society. In *So long a Letter*, the frustration and psychological trauma brought upon Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou by their husband's inability to live above religious or caste demands frustrate both women and only Assiatou's strong character saves her like Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus*. Eugene's misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Catholicism is much the same way as some fanatical Muslims interpret the tenets of Islam for their selfish or chauvinistic idiosyncrasies. For instance, the doctrine of Islam that stipulates that within one's capacity and capability, a man is permitted to marry up to or more than four wives is often abused. What this means is that a man must be able to cater for the wives and their offspring. In practice however, one finds that for selfish reasons of sexual lust and other personal wishes e.g. of ego enhancement, many people known to be poor or operating below subsistence still struggle for and insist on marrying four wives. In such cases, the consequences on the wives and the children are often unbearable. Notice the spate of promiscuity and child misdemeanor in our modern society.

A reading of *So long a Letter* exposes one to the couple Ramatoulaye and her husband Modou as fit choices for each other. Both are educated and have a vision for the emergent Senegalese society. The same is also true of Assiatou and Mawdo her husband. Observe the sacrifices Ramatoulaye makes in favour of Modou fall, her chosen love, whom she believes is intelligent and feeling. Her choice is a sacrifice and she says of this choice:

- "Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters, in our town struck dumb with astonishment" (*So long a Letter* P.16).

No one rejects wealth for poverty and a hard life, but this was Ramatoulaye's choice, a choice of love and principle, a choice with a vision of the life ahead given ideal situations of fidelity and trust. She looked up to a modern marriage with an educated man who would understand what it meant to love and to sacrifice one's life for one's partner. Her choice of trust, loyalty and understanding led her to reject the wealthy doctor Daouda Dieng who was:

- "Still a bachelor but too mature for my eighteen years..." But whose villa was the meeting place for the young elite (and) nothing was missing, from the refrigerator, containing its pleasant drinks to the record player, which exuded sometimes languorous, sometimes frenzied music ( *So Long a Letter* P.16).

Like Ramatoulaye's, Assiatou's marriage to Mawdo Ba was also controversial. Assiatou was a lowly girl to be married to a high class son as Ramatoulaye points out in her letter.

- "Then came your marriage with Mawdo Ba, recently graduated from the African School of Medicine and Pharmacy". A controversial marriage. I can still hear the angry rumors in town: What! A Toucouleur marrying a goldsmith's daughter? He will never "make money".

The two women had come a long way in their choices but they had their own principles and visions. They believed that they would succeed with their husbands, and Mawdo Ba like Modou Fall believed that marriage was a personal affair as Ramatoulaye again observes:

- We experienced the stiffness and reconciliations of married life. In our different ways we suffered the social constraints and heavy burdens of custom (*So Long a Letter* P.19).

But the two women soon tasted disappointment and betrayal after their sacrifices. Their visions of bliss, their love and trust were all shattered by their husbands in the guise of religious tradition which sounded more like spite. Modou Fall abandons Ramatoulaye for a little girl her daughter's age and in fact close friend Binetou.

Mawdo Ba succumbs to his mother's wish and betrays Assiatou's love and trust for him by taking a young girl Nabou to wife since tradition demanded of him to remain within his upper class. While Ramatoulaye laments her position in a letter to Assiatou:

- You remember Daouda Dieng, my former suitor. To his maturity I had preferred inexperience, to his generosity, poverty. To his gravity, spontaneity. To his stability, adventure (*So Long a Letter* P.59)

Assiatou on her part relied on her strength of character and rejected a second fiddle. She leaves her matrimonial home and abandons her husband. Though Ramatoulaye suffers dejection and shame, she is able to withstand the psychological trauma supported by her children and friend Assiatou who becomes a close confidante. The letters serve as a purgation of her feelings and an indictment on the society and traditions that have permitted this kind of treatment to be meted to the womenfolk. Assiatou has little or no regrets. The people who really suffer are the men Modou and Mawdo. We learn that Mawdo suffers psychological depression and disillusionment which are not good partners of a medical practitioner. Ramatoulaye speaks of him to Assiatou:

- Your departure had truly shaken him. His sadness was clearly evident. When he spoke of you, the inflexions in his voice hardened. But his disillusioned air, the bitter criticisms of his home, his wit which railed at everything did not in the least prevent the periodic swelling of young Nabou's belly. (*So Long...p34*)

We see from these that sexual satisfaction is not everything in marriage. Mawdo gets this from Nabou but he was still sad and unfulfilled in the absence of his real beloved wife. Why then did he succumb? In the case of Modou, Ramatoulaye tells us that despite his promotion to the rank of technical adviser, he could not control the mire of expenses by which he was engulfed:

- "Dead without a penny saved". Acknowledgment of debts? A pile of them: Cloth and gold traders, home delivery groceries and butchers, car purchase installments (*So Long a Letter* P.9-10).

There are numerous other debts incurred to facilitate Binetou's and her mother's happiness including four million francs borrowed from the bank. There is no doubt all these hasten Modou's break down and consequent death.

An interesting aspect of the two novels is that all the female protagonists or heroines survive the onslaught by leaning on each other, but the males either become disillusioned and/or die outright. Again Modou Fall and Mawdo Ba like Eugene Achike are seen as tragic figures whose lives have lost their meaning. They are shattered by their decisions to accept either willingly as in Modou's case or indirectly as in Mawdo's their second wives who become the bane of their eventual destruction. They fail to operate above the dictates imposed by religious tradition or a caste system which imposed expectations that destroy their personalities. In this, the characters all fail as educated people because they fail to adjust and dictate their own terms to society for their existence. They are tragic figures because their dreams remain unfulfilled through their own inadequacies. Their vision is aborted. Mawdo lost his freedom to decide what he wants when he allowed his mother to force a wife on him. His assertive personality is broken and his happiness mortgaged. Modou, on his own chooses his destiny when he abandons his first wife and takes Binetou whom Ramatoulaye sees as:

- A child the same age as my daughter Daba, promoted to the rank of my co-wife, whom I must face up to (*So Long a Letter* P.39).

And he pays dearly for it with his life. Here again as in the case of Eugene Achike, the misinterpretation and misapplication of religious demands with the socio-cultural realities of the modern developing society are responsible for the tragic disposition of the male characters. The archaic Catholic or Muslim patriarchal contexts within which the characters of Eugene Achike, Modou Fall and Mawdo Ba operate and succumb to pitch them against the demands of modernism and the aspirations of the emergent society which makes them tragic heroes of a male cause. Their show of manhood becomes their tragic flaws because their ideas are lost to time. Instead of their success as assertive personalities, society is cleansed of undesirable elements like Eugene, Modou and even Mawdo whose masculinity is emasculated as his mother takes control and dictates the terms of his living.

Conversely, the three heroines of "*So Long a Letter*", Ramatoulaye, Assiatou and Jacqueline are deeply in love with their husbands whom they value and respect as partners for their own sake not because of religion or cultural expectations. As a result, they marry against parental advice or approval since the parents operated from the background of traditional mores dictated by Islam or the caste system. To fulfill themselves, they revolt against societal or family norms. Even Ramatoulaye's is a quiet, assertive revolt as she refuses to marry Tamsir, her late husband's brother or her first suitor Daouda Dieng as was expected of her, even when this was against her personal philosophy as she states:

- "I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage..." (*So Long a Letter* P.56)

But she stays and succeeds with the help of Assiatou and her children. Assiatou on her part chooses to quit the marriage and fends for her children successfully to the shame and frustration of Mawdo. Jacqueline determined to live and accept her predicament when she discovered there was nothing physically wrong with her except stress. In "*Purple Hibiscus*", Beatrice Achike, in a frantic bid to free herself and her family from the stifling relationship that was gradually grounding them emotionally and psychologically, poisons her husband and frees them from his misplaced patriarchal control.



To this writer, these are the real heroes but who are unwittingly thrown into frustrating marriages because they want to fulfill the laws of nature as dictated here by religion. Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* is like Ramatoulaye or Assiatou in *So Long a Letter*; independent and assertive, with a clear knowledge of what they want even in distress. Unlike them, Ifeoma's problem is not institutionalized religion but the government which is corrupt and vindictive of everyone, male or female who expresses his or her freedom loudly and criticizes the failures of the rulers. Despite her husband's death, Ifeoma faces up to life. She struggles on the side of truth while her brand of Catholicism, unlike her brother's is realistic and forward looking. These are the real heroes.

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