

## EXPERIENTIAL MEANING IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This paper explored language use in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The aim is to describe the experiential meaning of the text and how Adichie's Lexico-grammatical choices reflect her experiences and worldviews of the post-colonial Nigeria. The study adopted Halliday's Transitivity Model of the systemic functional Linguistic (SFL) to analyze clauses. Textual data comprises excerpts purposively drawn from the novel. Clauses were identified, classified according to the participant-process-circumstance elements of the transitivity. Data were analyzed based on the principles of the transitivity model of SFL. The study revealed that Adichie utilized majority material processes to represent the actions, events, happenings and doings of Papa Eugene Achike. Again, that transitivity is a viable tool to reflect theme. The paper concludes that the lexico-grammatical choices of transitivity in the novel under study helped in the interpretation of the experiential meanings.

**Keywords:** Experiential meaning, transitivity, processes, participants, circumstances

### Introduction

The creative writer's tool for expressing his/her sensations, perceptions, themes among others is primarily by means of language. Every creative writer wrestles with words and meaning in order to convey his/her unique vision. This includes the Nigerian creative writers. In novels, writers embody in language, their experience of the phenomenon of the real world (Halliday, 184). Language encodes the individual and collective experiences of its users by the meaningful choices they make out of the totality of the potential choices made available to them by the network of options in the linguistic system.

The actual choices writers use make manifest in the form of texts, which Halliday (40) referred to as "the actualized meaning potential". Texts contain the writer's experience and worldview; that is, the way the writer chooses to project his/her experience of reality and the roles he/she wishes to assign to each character in the novel. Halliday and Matthiessen (26) opine that "we use language to make sense of our experience and to carry out our interactions with other people". From the opinion of Halliday and Matthiessen above, it is the obligation of the writer to turn experience into meaningful texts as language is a resource for making meaning and through the lexico-grammatical choices we make. The aim of this paper is to analyze the lexico-grammatical choices made by the writer in *Purple Hibiscus* and how it reflects her experiences of reality.

*Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explores the themes of domestic violence, religious hypocrisy, denial of rights, feminism, social relation extreme demonstration of power among others, through the story of Kambili Achike, a young Nigerian lady trapped in a world

of conflict and strife. Kambili comes from an affluent, devout Catholic family. Her father, Papa Eugene Achike is famous, wealthy, a factory owner, newspaper publisher but very strict, and he physically and emotionally abuses Kambili, his brother Jaja and mother; Beatrice. Eugene even disowned his father simply because he is an idol worshipper. Auntie Ifeoma (Papa's Sister) a university lecturer, lives in Nsukka. Jaja and Kambili visit their Aunt in Nsukka and discover a life beyond the confines of their father's authority. This made a lot of difference in their lives. Papa dies suddenly. The autopsy reveals he died of poison.

Violence permeates the novel as we see Eugene Achike wreaks untold and mindless havoc on his family; Kambili for eating ten minutes before mass; flinging the missal at Jaja for not attending the communion; pouring hot water on his children's feet for staying under the same roof at Nsukka with their grandfather (Papa Nnukwu) an idol worshipper; ruining of Jaja's finger when he was barely ten years old for missing two questions on his catechism test; and beating his wife Beatrice, to the point of losing her pregnancy among others. These instances of violence are part of the experiences of reality Adichie represented as texts through the lexicogrammatical choices she made in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*.

### **Methodology**

This paper aims at analyzing the experiential meaning (how language was used to represent the writer's experience of reality and world views of post-colonial Nigeria) in *Purple Hibiscus*. To achieve this aim, sixty (60) excerpts from the novel were drawn. The sixty (6) clauses were identified, listed and further classified and analyzed according to the participant-process-circumstance types of transitivity within the systemic functional linguistics framework. Simple percentages were used to find the frequency of occurrence of each of the process types. Following the SFL framework, qualitative and quantitative method, meaning will be revealed through the findings interpretation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Systemic Functional Linguistics**

This study adopts Michael Halliday's Transitivity model of the systemic functional linguistic (SFL). SFL studies the relationship between language and its functions in a social context. That is to say that SFL places higher importance on the concept of 'meaning as choice' and language function (Halliday, 11) Halliday (12) identifies three 'meaning potentials'; ideational, interpersonal, and textual and referred to them as 'metafunctions'. A writer chooses from the potential options available in the linguistic system to produce intended meaning which is significant to how she wishes to portray them in discourse. The actual choice made is a text which is meant to serve the writer's communicative purposes. Meaning is said to be an interface between contextual dimensions of field, tenor and mode; and lexicogrammatical dimensions of transitivity, mood and theme; and this simultaneously form what Halliday (39) calls "social semiotic". Texts are said to relate to its context through its register and its genre, and to the lexicogrammar through its choice of participant roles, role relationships and how the text relates to itself to form texture so as to be meaningful to the reader.

#### **Ideational Meaning**

The ideational metafunction is concerned with clause as a representation. Its function is that of representing "process" or experience. Though this function, "language provides a theory of human experience, (Halliday,) Ezeifeka (175) says that the ideational meaning has two components, "the experiential and the logical metafunctions'. Halliday (106) agreeing with the above asserts that "the experiential function belongs to the ideational metafunction, and the transitivity system construes the world of experience into manageable sets of process types,

which is also termed as the clause of representation”. While experiential meaning relates to how language represents experiences; the doings, happenings, state of being and other locations that relates to how we do things in the world, logical metafunction on the other hand, relate to how language structures these experiences, the interdependencies of clause nexuses that construe these experiences.

Experiential metafunction is realized by the lexicogrammatical feature of transitivity. Transitivity according to Morley (9) aims at “identifying the participants or things which are involved, the action and events taking place, and any relevant attending circumstance”. Halliday (107) states that “transitivity translates the world of experience into a manageable set of process types”. Richardson (54) notes that “the essence of representation is in the relationship of who is doing what? To whom?”

The experiential ideational metafunction is at the crux of this paper. The aim of this paper is to analyze the experiential clauses using Halliday’s transitivity and how the writer’s lexicogrammatical choices reflect her experiences of reality. Experiential meaning is realized in the grammar of the clause by the lexicogrammatical system of transitivity. (Halliday & Matthiessen). This paper is strictly restricted to experiential meaning, therefore, logical, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, though realized simultaneously in the grammar of the clause, are not discussed here because they are outside our scope.

Transitivity aims at identifying the participants or things which are involved, the actions and events taking place, and any relevant surrounding circumstance (Morley, 9). Halliday (107) states that “transitivity translates the world of experience into manageable set of process types. These our world of experiences include the goings-on doing, happening, sensing, being, saying, behaving, existing, which are carried out by people. These happenings, sensing and others are called ‘processes’ Halliday 9106) explains that processes are six (6) in number. They include: material, mental, relational, verbal, behavioural and existential. The people and entities that share these experiences are called ‘participants’. Halliday & Matthiessen (181) states that the participants carry out the processes under circumstances which may be constrained by time, location, manner, extent, contingency, accompaniment role and cause. Eggins (222) adds that “circumstances are usually marked by adverbial groups or prepositional phrase”. Hence, the structure forming elements of the transitivity system is the participant-process-circumstance configuration.

Halliday (222) adds that “the process is realized by the verbal group, participant by the nominal group and the circumstantial elements by the adverbial and prepositional phrases. Table 1 below summarizes the process types, their meaning and characteristics participants.

**Table 1: process types, their meanings and participants**

Process types	Category meaning	Participant directly	Participants
Material:	‘doing’	involved	Obliquely involved
Action	‘doing’	Actor, Goal	Recipient; scope
Event	‘happening’		Client
			Attribute
Behavioural	‘behaving’	Behavior	Behavior
<b>Mental:</b>	‘sensing’	Senser,	Inducer
Perception	‘seeing’	Phenomenon	

Cognition Desideration Emotion	‘thinking’ ‘wanting’ ‘feeling’		
<b>Verbal</b>	‘saying’	Sayer, target	Receiver, verbiage
<b>Relational:</b> Attribution Identification	‘being’ ‘attributing’ ‘identifying’	Carrier, attribute identified, identifier token, value	Attributor, Beneficiary Assigner
<b>Existential</b>	‘existing’	Existent	

Adapted from Halliday and Matthiessen’s Introduction to functional grammar P.311

### Data Analysis and Findings

#### Analysis of Experiential meaning through the Lexicogrammatical Features of Transitivity.

The statistical results of the analysis carried out in the selected excerpts from the novel under study are presented below:

**Table 2: Percentage of Transitivity Analysis**

No	Processes	Number	Percentage
1	Material	35	58.3
2	Mental	4	6.7
3	Relational	8	13.3
4	Verbal	9	15
5	Behavioural	4	6.7
	Total	60	100

Table 2 above shows high prevalence of material clause (35), mental clause (4) relational (8), verbal (9) and behavioural (4). There is a low occurrence of mental and behavioural clauses. Existential did not reflect at all. Owing to the low occurrence of mental and behavioural clauses, we still cease to make reference to them as they are not significant for this study.

#### Material process

A material process is the process of doing or happening in the transitive or intransitive clause which shows actions, activities and events. In this analysis, we will categorize the various material processes from the excerpts in Appendix A as follows:

1. **Operative process** – Actor – Goal  
Speaker as Actor (Singular ‘I’)  
Speaker + others as Actor (Plural ‘we’)
2. **Receptive Process** (Goal with Actor Omitted)
3. **Lexically indeterminate Evasive process** (material process shading into mental ones).

#### A. Operative process

Speaker as Actor (‘I’)

1. **I started to wolf** the cereal down
2. **I put** the bowl down

In these two excerpts, we saw the Actor (the one that does the action – that is, the one that brings about the change) as singular and in the subject positions. Here, the actor is personal (a human being) charged with the role of subject. This means that ‘I’ in the subject position is the one carrying out the action.

#### B. Speaker + other as Actor (plural ‘we’)

3. **We never broke** the Eucharistic fast (P.109)

**4. But we would not eat** until we came back home

The use of 'we' as the actor is not much in the excerpts. The use of 'we' makes the speaker (Kambili) to hide in the crowd of other participants. This goes to show that she is not directly responsible for the particular action carried out

2. **Receptive Process** (Goal with Actor Omitted)

Receptive process allows the speaker/writer to omit the Actor – the 'doer' of the action. It was observed that the excerpts did not make use of receptive process simply because it is a narrative told from the first person narrative point, one of the major characters in the novel. So, Kambili made use of first, second and third person singular. Subject pronouns like 'I', You, he, she and it. They were observed to be prevalent in the clauses, for instance,

**5. He picked the missal**

**6. It missed Jaja**

**7. He unbuckled his belt slowly**

**8. He poured hot water on my feet**

**9. It cracked the top shelf**

3. Lexically – indeterminate Operational process with speaker as Actor (material process shading into mental Processes)

**10. I started to wolf** the cereal down

**11. I wanted to say** yes

The indeterminate operational process types were observed to be very few. They reveal actions that are weak.

In the excerpts, the writer made use of both transitive and intransitive verbs to construe actions/events/happenings. Examples of such verbs are: missed, took, gave, locked, came, drove, poured, wanted to say took, lowered among others.

**12. Mama gave me the panadol tablets**

**13. He unbuckled his belt**

**14. it landed on Jaja**

**15. Your father broke it on my belly**

**16. The belt stopped**

The Actor (Mama) is the topical theme of clause 15. Mama consciously performs the action of the material process of "doing" by giving Kambili the panadol tablets. Kambili received the action of 'giving' so also, the actions of 'broke' 'unbuckled' and 'landed'. These were some of the material processes that Adichie chose to construe the actions of Papa Eugene in the novel. In 13, the action of the transitivity verb 'unbuckled' allows for transfer of activity from the Actor, Papa Eugene to the goal 'belt' and another action was performed 'landed' signifying 'beating' which was received by the goal 'Jaja'. The material processes we saw in clauses 12, 13, 14, 15 above are effective and has a high transitivity function because it has an end point. However, the example in clause 16 'stopped' did not extend to any entity in the clause.

The Actors in the material clauses above are mainly humans and less of inanimate objects. The Actor brings out the action of the verb in the external world. The active transitivity clauses allow the writer the option of placing the participants in the theme position and therefore, representing 'concrete' physical events. This made it possible for Adichie to pass her domestic violence message across. Transitivity options express the main theme of the clause which is represented in the form of process with associated participants and circumstances.

### Verbal process

In the excerpts, there are eight clauses containing verbal processes. One of the clauses is:

17. ‘Jaja you did not go to communion’ (**verbiage**), papa (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) quietly (**cir: manner**)

A verbal process is the process of saying. The participant who says is known as the sayer. In clause 17 above, the sayer is Papa Eugene Achike. Jaja missed the Holy Communion and especially on a Palm Sunday. Papa being a religious fanatic, he never expected anyone to miss communion not to talk of his own family member. Another participant in the saying is the ‘verbiage’ verbiage is the content (message) of what is said or name of the saying. Verbiage in clause 17 was addressing Jaja, papa is inquiring to know why Jaja missed the Communion. The verbal clause are usually accompanied by quotes but when reported, it is not in quotes. Adichie used verbal clauses in the novel to develop accounts of dialogue together with quotes of what was said. The essence is to bring out the typical voices of the characters in its natural way.

Another participant of the verbal clause is the ‘recipient’ or ‘receiver’. Below is an example:

18. “Eat a little cornflakes, quickly” (verbiage: quoted) mama (sayer) said (verbal) almost in a whisper (Cir: manner), you (recipient) need something in your stomach to hold the panadol.

In example 18 above, mama is the sayer, addressing Kambili (the recipient)

### **Relational process**

A relational process is known as the processes of ‘being’ and ‘having’ not ‘doing’ or ‘sensing’. Relational clauses construe changes without transferring any action on any participant. Relational process can be classified into three types: attributive, identifying and possessive processes. In the examples below, we have attributive relational process clauses.

19. Wafer (carrier) was (relational) too secular (Attributive)  
20. it (carrier) was (relational) a heavy belt (attribute).

The wafer in clause 19 refers to the ‘Host’ (bread) which signifies the body of Christ as we receive communion. Jaja preferred to call it wafer but papa Eugene sees it as being too common. Rather, it should be called host.

In example 20 above, the belt that papa beat the family members with, was being described. Adichie uses relational process to describe things.

### **Circumstance**

The circumstances found in the processes as evident in the excerpts from Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* are mainly those of location, time and manner. Adichie used ‘location’ to show the places where the action took place, she as well used the circumstantial element of manner to describe how the action was carried out. Adichie used ‘manner’ to describe the pain Kambili, Jaja and Beatrice felt each time papa Eugene descends on them. For example:

He (actor) unbuckled (material) his belt (goal) slowly (manner)

In the example above, Adichie told us how Papa Eugene unbuckled his heavy belt before the belt started landing on them. The clause above shows the manner papa’s action was carried out.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we tried to find out how the lexicogrammatical choice in the transitivity system made by Adichie in her novel reflected the experiential meaning of the characters, the actions and happenings stated in the novel.

It was found out that Adichie made the most use of material processes which shows that the choice of transitive and intransitive verbs depict actions. This is to say that the lexicogrammatical choices made determines the type of process in the clause. Again, the findings reveal that transitivity analysis can be expressed as the main theme of the clause or text. Theme of domestic violence was represented in the excerpts analyzed through the choice of verbs the writer made. Such verbs like; broke, unbuckled, hit, poured, among others depict violence.

The use of verbal clause was to develop accounts of dialogue and to depict the voice of the characters in its natural way.

Also, relational clauses were used to assign attribute to actions, events, ideas, feelings, opinions and behaviours. The actions of the characters were not brought to bare on these processes. The circumstances were used to show the location (places) the actions/events took place, and also to describe how (manner) the action happened.

Finally, we want to categorically state that the lexicogrammatical choices of transitivity in the novel under study helped us in the interpretation of the experiential meanings in the novel. It is established that transitivity system can facilitate the interpretation of language use in context and portrays how the clause and its parts are potential sources of information.

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### APPENDIX

#### *Purple Hibiscus* (PH)

#### Excerpts 1

1. "Jaja, you did not go to communion", (**verbiage: quoted**) Papa (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) quietly; almost a question (**Cir: manner**). (pg. 14)2. Jaja (**behavior**) starred (**behavioural**) at the missal on the table (**Cir: location**)3. As though he (**carrier**) were (**relational**) not addressing it (**attributes**)4. The wafer (**actor**) gives (**material**) me (**beneficiary**) bad breath (**goal**)5. I (**behavior**) starred (**behavioural**) at Jaja6. Had something (**carrier**) come (**relational**) loose (**attribute**) in his head (**Cir: location**)?7. Papa (**sayer**) insisted (**verbal**) we call it host (**verbiage**)8. "Wafer" (**carrier**) was (**relational**) too secular (**Attribute**) 9. Papa (**senser**) looked (mental) around the room (**phenomenon**) quickly (**Cir: manner**)10. He (**Actor**) picked (**material**) the missal (**goal**) 11. And flung (**material**) it (**goal**) across the room, towards Jaja (**Cir: location**) 12. It (**Actor**) missed (**material**) Jaja (**goal**) completely (**Cir: manner**) 13. But it (**Actor**) hit (**material**) the glass etagere (**goal**)14. Which mama (**Actor**) polished (**material**) often. (**cir: Extent**)15. It (**Actor**) cracked (**material**) the top shelf (**goal**) ... (pgs 14-15)16. We (**Actor**) never broke (**material**) the Eucharistic

fast (**goal**) (pg. 109)17. The table (**carrier**) was (**relational**) set (**attribute**) for breakfast with teacups and cereal bowls side by side (**Cir: manner**)18. But we (**Actor**) would not eat (**material**) until we came back home (**Cir: extent**) 19. “Eat a little corn flakes, quickly” (**verbiage: quoted**) mama (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) almost in a whisper (**Cir: manner**). “you (**recipient**) need something in your stomach to hold the Panadol” (**verbiage: quoted**) 20. I (**actor**) started to wolf (**material**) the cereal (**goal**) down (**Cir: location**)21. Mama (**Actor**) gave (**material**) me (**beneficiary**) the Panadol tablets (**goal**) still in the silver coloured foil (**Cir: location**)22. Jaja (**Actor**) had not put (**material**) much cereal (**goal**) in the bowl (**Cir: location**)23. When the door (**actor**) opened (**material**).24. And papa (**actor**) came (**material**) in (**Cir: location**) 25. “You are eating ten minutes before mass? (**verbiage: quoted**) “Her period started and she has cramps” (**verbiage: quoted**) mama (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) 26. “Has the devil (**sayer**) asked (**verbal**) all (**recipient**) to go on errand for him?” **verbiage: quoted**)27. He (**Actor**) unbuckled (**material**) his belt (**goal**) slowly (**Cir: manner**)28. It (**carrier**) was (**relational**) a heavy belt (**Attribute**) made of layers of brown leather with a sedate leather-covered buckle (**circumstance: manner**)29. It (**Actor**) landed (**material**) on Jaja (**goal**) first across his shoulder (**Cir: location**) 30. The Mama (**Actor**) raised (**material**) her hands (**goal**) as it landed on her upper arm (**Cir: location**) 31. I (**Actor**) put (**material**) the bowl (**goal**) down just as the belt landed on my back (**Cir: location**) 32. The belt (**actor**) stopped (**material**) 33. And papa (**behavior**) starred (**behavioural**) at the leather in his hand (**Cir: location**) 34. Mama (**Actor**) took (**material**) the belt (**goal**) from him (**beneficiary**) and laid it on the table (**Cir: location**) (Pg. 109-110)35. Your father (**Actor**) broke (**material**) it on my belly (**goal**) (pg. 253) 36. “My blood finished on the floor even before he took me to St. Agnes, (**verbiage: quoted**) my doctor (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) there was nothing he could do to save it” (**verbiage: quoted**) (pg. 253) 37. I (**carrier**) was (**relational**) six weeks gone (**phenomenon**) (pg. 253)38 When he was ten (**Cir: time**) he (**Actor**) had missed (**material**) two questions (**Goal**) on his catechism test (**Cir: location**).39. And was not (**Relational**) named the best (**Attribute**) in his first Holy Communion class (**Cir: Location**)40. Papa (**Actor**) took (**material**) him (**goal**) upstairs.41. And locked (**material**) the door (**goal**) 42. Jaja (**Actor**) in tears (**Cir: manner**) came (**material**) out (**Cir: location**) supporting his left hand with his right (**Cir: manner**)43. And Papa (**Actor**) drove (**material**) him (**goal**) to St. Agnes hospital (**Cir: location**)44. Papa was crying (**material**), too as he carried Jaja in his arms like a baby (**Cir: manner**) all the way to the car (**Cir: location**) 45. Later (**Cir: time**) Jaja (**Actor**) told (**material**) me (**goal**) that papa (**Actor**) had avoided (**material**) his right hand because it is the hand he writes with (**Cir: season**) (pg. 53) 46. “You knew your grandfather was coming to Nsukka, did you not” (**verbiage: quoted**) he (**sayer**) asked (**verbal**) in Igbo (**Cir: manner**)47. “You knew you would be sleeping in the same house as a heathen” (**verbiage: quoted**)48. “Kambili, you are precious” (**verbiage: quoted**) His (**Sayer**) voice quavered (**verbal**) like someone speaking at a funeral choked with emotion (**Cir: manner**)49. He (**Actor**) lowered (**material**) the kettle (**goal**) into the tub (**Cir: location**) tilted it towards my feet (**Cir: manner**) 50. He (**Actor**) poured (**material**) the hot water (**goal**) on my feet (**Cir: location**) slowly (**Cir: manner**) 51. He (**carrier**) was (**relation**) crying (**Attribute**) now (**Cir: time**) 52. I (**senser**) saw (**material**) the moist stream (**phenomenon**) 53. Before (**Cir: time**) I (**senser**) saw (**mental**) the water (**phenomenon**)54. I (**sense**) watched (**mental**) the water (**phenomenon**) leave the kettle flowing almost in show emotion (**Cir: manner**) and are to my feet (**Cir: location**) 55. The pain of contact (**carrier**) was (**related**) so pure (**Attribute**), so scalding (**Cir: extent**) 56. I (**senser**) felt (**mental**) for a second (**phenomenon**) 57. And then (**Cir: time**) I (**behavior**) screamed (**behavioural**)58. “That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin, you burn your feet” **verbiage: quoted**) he (**sayer**) said (**verbal**) 59. I (**Actor**) wanted to say (**material**) yes, Papa “because he was right (**reason**) 60. But the burning on my feet (**Cir: location**) was (**relational**) up, (**Cir: location**) in swift courses of excruciating pain (**manner**) to my head, lips and eyes (**location**)